

Theological University Kampen/Utrecht

**A Comparative study on the concept of Avatara and Christ's Incarnation: An Attempt
to develop an approach to communicate Christ's Incarnation in the South Indian
Context**

**A Thesis for the requirement of the Course
Master of Intercultural Reformed Theology (MIRT)**

**By
Parvathegowda H. S.
Theological University Kampen/Utrecht**

**Submitted To
Dr. Jos Colijn
Dr. Hans Burger**

Table of Contents

Chapter One	04
1. Introduction	
1.1. Introduction	04
1.2. Motivation for this Research	04
1.3. Research Objectives	05
1.4. Problem Statement	05
1.5. Research Questions	07
1.6. Position of the present researcher	08
1.7. Methodology	08
1.8. Content Description per Chapter	09
Chapter Two	11
2. Concept and understanding of Avatara in the Hindu Sacred Texts	
2.1. Descriptions of Terminology-Avatara	11
2.1.1. The Definition of the Term Avatara	11
2.1.2. The Concept of Avatara	12
2.1.3. The Understanding of Avatara	13
2.2. Supreme God and Avatara in the Sacred Texts	13
2.2.1. The Supreme God Purusha or Prajapati	15
2.2.2. The Supreme God Brahman	18
2.3. The Purpose and Goal of Avatara in the Sacred Texts	22
Chapter Three	27
3. The Understanding of the Incarnation According to John 1:1-18 and the Reformed View	
3.1. Descriptions of Terminology-Incarnation	27
3.1.1. Etymology of the Term Incarnation	27
3.1.2. The Development of the Concept of Incarnation in the Christian Theology	28
3.2. The Incarnation of Christ According to John 1:1-18	29
3.2.1. Pre-incarnate Word	30

3.2.2. Incarnate Word	32
3.3. Selected Reformed Theologians' Views on the Incarnation of Christ	34
3.3.1. Herman Bavinck's View on the Incarnation	35
3.3.2. Gerrit Cornelis Berkouwer's View on the Incarnation	40
Chapter Four	47
4. Indian Christian Theologians' Understanding of the Christ's Incarnation	
4.1. Understanding of Christ's Incarnation According to John 1:1-18.	47
4.1.1. Reason for Using the Term Avatara for Christ in John 1:14	48
4.1.2. Different Opinions on Using Avatara for Christ's Incarnation	50
4.2. Selected Indian Christian Theologians' Views on the Incarnation of Christ	51
4.2.1. Vengal Chakkarai's View on Christ's Incarnation	51
4.2.2. Mariasusai Dhavamony's View on Christ's Incarnation	55
Chapter Five	60
5. Comparison and Contrast of the Concept of Avatar and Christ's Incarnation	
5:1. The Views of Vedic Creational Texts and the John's Prologue	60
5.2. General Revelation and Special Revelation	62
5.3. Prajapati and Jesus Christ	63
5.4. Many Avatars and One Incarnation	64
5.5. The Purpose of Avatara and Christ's Incarnation	66
5.6. Prophecy, Prediction and Fulfillment	67
5.7. Knowability and Unknowability of Avatara and Incarnation	68
5.8. The Vessels of Grace and Permanent Incarnation	70
Chapter Six	73
6. Conclusion and Recommendations	
Bibliography	79

Chapter One

Introduction

1.1. Introduction

India is one of the prominent countries in Asia, containing the largest population in the world. It is also the home of many major religions in the world, Hinduism being the dominant one among them all. In India, Christianity forms a minority of about three percent but is one of the fastest-growing religions. The message of Christ has impacted many lives including myself as a researcher. However, there are many issues and problems in communicating Christ to the native people. Among the Indian Christian theologians, some suggest that Christ can be communicated as the Avatara of God, while others think Christ and his incarnation are unique compared to the concept of Hindu Avatars. In the South Indian context, one of the major problems is the understanding of the one exclusive divine incarnation of Christ due to the belief in the concept of many divine and human Avatars in the Hindu belief system.¹ Hence, the research will aim to investigate the Hindu understanding of the concept of Avatara and the Christian concept of incarnation. Further, how the concept of Avatara can be viewed to communicate the incarnation of Christ without compromising on any essentials of the doctrine of the incarnation of Christ.

1.2. Motivation for this Research

There is tension between the Indian Christian theologians on the concept of Avatara and the incarnation of Christ. Moreover, in South India, Hindus and many new converts think that the incarnation of Christ is the same as deities appearing as human beings to save people just like Hindus think of Avatara. However, the incarnation of Christ cannot be the same as they think or understand. Moreover, when I attended the course ‘the Core and Fabric of Reformed Theology,’ one of the subjects of intercultural studies, the MIRT program (Master of Intercultural Reformed Theology) I came across the concept of the incarnation of Christ. When attending the course, I discovered that in Reformed covenant theology, the incarnation of Christ begins in God’s eternal counsel, even before the creation of the world. My knowledge about this dogma was limited, prior this course. According to the doctrine of incarnation, Christ chose to be ‘born of the virgin Mary’ in the ‘fullness of time’ according to the eternal plan and purpose of God is one subject I properly need to explore. This suggests

¹ J Russell Chandran, “Development of Christian Theology in India: A Critical Survey” in *Readings in Indian Christian Theology*, ed. R.S. Sugirtharajah and Cecil Hargreaves (Delhi: ISPCK, 1993), 4-8.

that the concept of Christ's incarnation is not just a deity coming as human, but it implies so much more. It can be assumed that there are other aspects, such as Christ's involvement in the plan of God, the revelation of God, creation, preparation, and the salvation of humanity. Previously I explored the avatars of Hinduism and similarities in the concept and ideology. However, compared to the concept and ideology of Avatara of Hindu sacred texts the incarnation of Christ seems so different and unique that it needs investigation.

1.3. Research Objectives

This research aims to find the distinction between the concept of Avatara and the concept of Christ's incarnation in order to gain comprehensive understanding of the incarnation of Christ as a person. This research aims to provide insight into Christ and His incarnation in the Indian Hindu context, Indian Christian theological understanding, and the Western Reformed theological understanding of the incarnation of Christ. In doing this, research may raise insights into the way Hinduism views the concept of Avatara and the views of Indian Christian theologians and Western Christian theologians on the incarnation of Christ. This research may enable the researcher to contribute to Indian Christian Theology and the Christian mission work in communicating the unique character of the incarnation of Christ in the Indian context among the Hindus and Christians (new converts).

1.4. Problem Statement

How can we present the uniqueness and exclusiveness of the incarnation of Jesus Christ and its relevance and implication to Christian mission in the South Indian context amid diverse Avatars of Hinduism?

Problem Description in Brief:

One of the challenging subjects in the South Indian context is to share the message of Jesus Christ as the God who came as human and dwelt among us. This is because of the numerous mythological stories of avatars that Hindus and many new converts from Hindu backgrounds know which had much influence on the concept of Hindu avatars. They either do not know Christ's incarnation properly or do not know it according to the Scripture. According to Rigveda² three descriptions present the concept of a supreme god in Hinduism. All these

² Rig-Veda is one of the sacred canonical Hindu Vedic text and first part of the four Vedas (Rigveda, Yajurveda, Samaveda and Atharvaveda). It is known as the oldest among all other Hindu sacred texts orally transmitted

three descriptions present Purusha the Prajapati as the supreme god of Hinduism.³ The later developments in Hinduism have connected the supreme god Prajapati to various gods, goddesses, incarnations, and emanations. The Prajapati was given the name Brahma due to a later development considers as the supreme god. Through Brahma, Prajapati connected with several gods of the Vedic pantheon who are considered avatars of gods. Many groups of gods are also considered as the Prajapatis or sons or emanations or avatars of Prajapati.⁴ A group of Hindus believe even Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva the main Hindu trinity gods of later developments are incarnations of Prajapati. In the Puranas (‘ancient writings’) all the characteristics of Prajapati are depicted to Vishnu, who is believed to be incarnated several times.⁵ Hence, Hindus believe the avatar of god is the incarnation of the supreme god. In addition, they believe that this god incarnated many times in the human world which resulted in numerous gods among the Hindus. However, Christians believe in one incarnation of Jesus Christ. This is a major difference between Hindus and Christians regarding the incarnation of god. There must be some important reasons and aspects to believe in one incarnation of Jesus Christ that Hindus and Indian new converts need to know.

In the Bible, among many passages the two passages particularly speak of the incarnation of Christ the fact that Christ as God became a human being. The first is Philippians 2:5-11, which speaks of Christ's incarnation starting at the point of eternity. The second is the Gospel of John 1:1-14 affirms that ‘the Word was God’ and the ‘Word became flesh and dwelt among us. Based on these verses many Western writers assert that Jesus is the God who became human.’⁶ The Gospel of John 1:14 is the key to Indian context because Jesus incarnation was translated as the ‘Avatar of God’ in most of the South Indian languages.⁷ Indian Christian theologians argue that Jesus is the embodiment of the supreme God who came in the flesh as the Avatar of God which also needs clarification.⁸ Hence, the term

since the 2nd millennium BC, between 1500 and 1000 BC. “Rigveda,” *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rigveda>, (accessed on May 08, 2024).

³ In Rigveda, the 90th hymn of the tenth mandala (tenth circle) of the Rigveda (book 10:90:1-16) is the Purusha Sukta, is a most used Sanskrit hymn, speaks of the Purusha (ancient man) as the ‘Cosmic Being’ “Purusha Sukta,” *A Little Book of Prayers, Mantras & Gayatris*, https://www.stephen-knapp.com/purusha_sukta.htm, (accessed on May 08, 2024).

⁴ “Prajapati,” in *New World Encyclopedia*, <https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Prajapati>, (accessed on May 09, 2024).

⁵ Daniel E. Bassuk, *Incarnation in Hinduism and Christianity* (Hampshire: The MACMILLAN Press Ltd., 1993), 15.

⁶ Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1994), 280.

⁷ *The Holy Bible, Kannada: New Testament*, (Bengaluru: The Bible Society of India, 2010), 107.

⁸ Vinath Ramachandra, *The Recovery of Mission* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1999), 236.

‘Avatar’ seems to connect both religious belief and concept regarding the incarnation that made Indian theologians to introduce Jesus as the only exclusive avatar of God.⁹ However, while the ideology, concept, and meaning of the terms ‘incarnation’ and ‘avatar’ seem similar in both religions, their meaning differs. Hence, this research is an attempt to mainly clarify the difference between the concept of Avatara of Hinduism and the incarnation of Christ.

According to Klostermaier,¹⁰ Hindus consider Jesus Christ as one of the avatars of their supreme god, one of the puranic (Hindu epic story) sons of god. Hence, Hindus think and new Christian converts ask, what is unique in the incarnation of Christ that necessitates knowing about the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Hindus may know about the incarnations and believe in the incarnations of god and the gods of their sacred texts who as they believe come to save and protect people from time to time.¹¹ However, certainly the incarnation of Christ, coming only once as an incarnation with the purpose of salvation for all the humanity is very different. Moreover, they do reject the Christian claim of Christ being the unique incarnation of God who makes the way for salvation for all who believe in Him. It could be perceived that they lack the proper understanding of Christ's unique incarnation.¹² This problem exists among both the Hindus and Christians (new converts) in the South Indian context. This is the main reason for this investigation into the character of the incarnation of Christ and to compare it to Hindu perceptions of incarnation.

1.5. Research Questions

Main question:

What can we learn from a conversation between selected Reformed and Indian Christian theologians on the concepts of incarnation and Avatara in order to communicate the unique characteristics of the divine incarnation of Christ in the Indian context?

⁹ Klostermaier, “What Do Men Say about the Son of Man?” in *Readings in Indian Christian Theology*, ed. R.S. Sugirtharajah and Cecil Hargreaves (Delhi: ISPCK, 1993), 121.

¹⁰ Klaus K. Klostermaier is a Christian Catholic ordained priest and a scholar of Hinduism, Indian history, and culture. He was a philosopher, scholar, missionary, and theology teacher for nine years in India. “Klaus K. Klostermaier,” *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Klaus_Klostermaier, (accessed on May 13, 2024).

¹¹ Klostermaier, “What Do Men Say about the Son of Man?,” 121-123.

¹² Ken Gnanakan, *The Pluralistic Predicament* (Bangalore: Theological Book Trust, 1992), 104.

Sub questions:

1. What is the concept and significance of Avatara in Hinduism according to Hindu sacred texts?
2. What is the concept and significance of the incarnation of Christ according to John 1:1-18 and in the Reformed understanding of the Dutch theologians Herman Bavinck and Gerrit Cornelis Berkouwer?
3. How do Indian Christian theologians interpret the unicity of Christ's incarnation in the Hindu Context with reference to Vengal Chakkarai and Mariasusai Dhavamony?
4. What are the differences and comparisons between the Hindu and Christian concepts of Avatara and incarnation?
5. What would be fruitful approaches to preach the unicity of Christ's incarnation in the Indian context?

1.6. Position of the present researcher

I was born and brought up in an orthodox Hindu family and I am not fully ignorant of the Hindu belief system. After I was introduced to the Christian faith, I began to learn and see my faith and belief in a new way according to the Christian Scripture. In the context of this research this is helpful to me to give closer attention to both Hindu-Christian sides, learn from both sides, and bring out better perspectives of the concept of avatar or incarnation. Since I have experienced difficult situations of sharing Christ and his incarnation with Hindus and Christians (new converts from Hindu backgrounds), I realized that the present assignment is a challenging task. Hypothetically this research may help me to bring out the unique character of Christ's incarnation better. This would be helpful to handle those critical situations in sharing Christ in a meaningful way.

1.7. Methodology

The topic will be investigated from religious and theological perspectives with missiological concerns. The research aims to use the comparative study methodology which includes library research with primary and secondary literature. The research will use the translated (from Sanskrit to English) Vedic texts that are related to the concept of avatar and other

literature related to the topic. The research will use the written materials of Indian and Western theologians, and other literature related to the incarnation of Christ to bring out a comprehensive understanding, mainly focusing on the Gospel of John Chapter 1:1-18. After drawing the teaching of both avatars of Hinduism in Vedic texts and the incarnation in the Gospel of John, a comparative study will be done to answer the main question. An attempt will be made to develop an approach to share Christ's incarnation with the Hindus and Christians (new converts).

1.8. Content Description per Chapter

The first chapter contains the introduction of the topic and an overview of the research problem, research question, and sub-questions. This chapter briefly gives a summary of the following chapters.

The second chapter will study the concept and understanding of Avatar in the Vedic texts. It pays attention to the descriptions of the term Avatara used for the concept of Avatara and its usage in Hindu theologies and literature. The chapter discusses the concept of the Hindu supreme god in Vedic Texts and the development of the concept of Avatars and emanations through the supreme god according to Hindu sacred texts.

The third chapter will survey the Christian theological understanding of the concept of incarnation. It will examine especially the interpretation and understanding of the Gospel of John 1:1-18 and its relation with the doctrine of incarnation. The study will be focused on the Reformed views of Herman Bavinck and Gerrit Cornelis Berkouwer regarding the incarnation of Christ and how their perspectives contribute to the Indian context in using the concept of incarnation.

The fourth chapter will explore the understanding of Indian Christian theologians about the concept of Avatar and incarnation according to the Gospel of John 1:1-18. I would write some of the views of Indian Christian theologians in comparing the concept of the avatar to Christ's incarnation and its negative and positive aspects and differences will be discussed with views of Vengal Chakkarai and Mariasusai Dhavamony.

The fifth Chapter will discuss the points of comparison and contrast based on the previous chapters, draw possible useful elements from the study, and highlight the positive aspects of

the Vedic concept and Gospel of John 1:1-18. The Chapter will seek to incorporate the views and perspectives of previous discussions for a better understanding of the concept of avatar and incarnation.

The final chapter summarizes all the previous chapters to answer the main question and will seek to develop a possible Christian approach to sharing Christ in the South Indian Context. This chapter will attempt to recommend a sympathetic approach to sharing Christ's incarnation with Hindus and Christians (new converts) in an understandable way without any confusion with the Hindu understanding of the concept of avatars.

Chapter Two

Concept and Understanding of Avatara in the Hindu Sacred Texts

To understand the concept and understanding of the Avatara in the Hindu sacred texts, it is necessary to trace the meaning and the concept of the term Avatara. And how this concept relates to the supreme god and emanations according to the Vedic texts in later developments? Hence, this chapter focuses on: what is the concept and significance of Avatara in Hinduism according to Hindu sacred texts?

2.1. Descriptions of Terminology-Avatara

The term Avatara is widely used in Hindu literature and interchangeably in English; the term incarnation is used in India to express the idea of Avatara in English. However, both terms may have differences in essence and concept. Using these terms, religious concepts may incorrectly be expressed without noticing the differences. Hence, it is important to study the meaning and the description of the term Avatara.

2.1.1. The Definition of the Term Avatara

In Hinduism, the term Avatara is used to express the deities leaving his/her heavenly abode and descending into the human world. Hence, to express this act of god, in human appearance, literally for 'divine descent' the term Avatara is used.¹³ The term Avatara developed in the ancient Indian language Sanskrit, a combination of two Sanskrit words *Ava* and *tar*.¹⁴ According to the Webster's New International Dictionary, the meaning of these two words: *Ava* means 'down' or 'root' and *tar* or *tara* means 'to cross' or 'pass over' which means 'coming down.'¹⁵ Further, David Burnett, a missionary to India and a scholar in Hinduism, explains this from the prefix *ava*, 'down' and the verb *tr*, 'to cross over' meaning that Avatara is an appearance of any deity of heaven on earth.¹⁶ Therefore, the term Avatara is used to express the act of one coming down, a descent, or down-coming (*ava-tara*). Bassuk writes that Avatara is crossing, passing, or coming down is a symbol of the passage of god

¹³ David Frawley, *What is Hinduism?: A Guide for the Global Mind* (New Delhi: Bloomsbury Publishing India, 2018), 168.

¹⁴ Kim Knott, *Hinduism: A Very Short Introduction* (United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2016), 117.

¹⁵ *Webster's New International Dictionary* (Springfield: Merriam Webster Inc., 2002).

¹⁶ David Burnett, *The Spirit of Hinduism* (England: Monarch Publication, 2006), 96.

from eternity into the temporal realm.¹⁷ Thus, the term Avatara in Hinduism is used to distinguish a person, angel, or deity who is a ‘descent’ and not an ordinary human but a divine or deity, coming down from heaven and appearing on earth.¹⁸

2.1:2. The Concept of Avatara

The concept of Avatara in the Hindu tradition point its origin to the Vedic literature while others think it began in the section of the Mahabharata (one of the great epics of India) another sacred text.¹⁹ Klostermaier assumes that the totemism of tribal cults may have developed the concept because of their acquaintance with Vishnu (one of the main deities of Hinduism), the all supreme god, the all-pervading one.²⁰ Further, Dandekar affirms that the Vedic literature speaks of Vishnu as a solar divinity, coming down from heaven to earth from his highest abode. In the Rigveda, there is a reference²¹ to Vishnu coming as an Avatara. Vedic texts also speak of other gods who assumed different forms and came to Earth to accomplish their tasks on Earth.²²

Further, according to the epic Mahabharata in the section of Bhagavad-Gita,²³ the word Avatara is not used, the concept is present in the manifestation of Krishna²⁴ as the Avatara of Vishnu.²⁵ In this section, there is a vision of the transfiguration of Krishna, where Krishna was addressed twice as ‘O Vishnu.’ Here Krishna being in the human form, reveals himself as the supreme personality of Vishnu.²⁶ Brown interprets the words of Krishna in the same section, “I am born, the Lord of all things. Yet I am born by entering nature through my mysterious power, I decent myself from age to age, to save the righteous, to destroy the wicked and to re-establish Righteous principles.”²⁷ Moreover, in the *Bhagavad Gita*, the

¹⁷ Daniel E. Bassuk, *Incarnation in Hinduism and Christianity* (Hampshire: The MACMILLAN Press Ltd., 1993), 3.

¹⁸ Geoffrey Parrinder, *The Christian Debate: Light from the East* (London: Virrely Gollanez Ltd., 2009), 66.

¹⁹ A.P. Karmarkar, “Religion and Philosophy of the Epics,” in *The Culture Heritage of India*, ed. C.P. Ramaswami Aiyar, Vol.II (Calcutta: The Ramakrishna Mission institute of culture, 1997), 85.

²⁰ Klaus K. Klostermaier, *A Survey of Hinduism* (Albany: New York Press, 1994), 145.

²¹ Rigveda 6:49.13

²² R.N. Dandekar, “Indian Mythology,” in *The Culture Heritage of India*, ed. C.P. Ramaswami Aiyar, Vol.II (Calcutta: The Ramakrishna Mission institute of culture, 1997), 236.

²³ Bhagavad-Gita is called ‘song of god’ referred as the Gita (song) is an important part of the great epic Mahabharata. “Bhagavad-Gita,” in *New World Encyclopedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bhagavad_Gita, (accessed on May 14, 2024).

²⁴ Krishna is worshiped in Hinduism as the main deity and believed to be the eighth Avatara of Vishnu.

“Krishna,” in *New World Encyclopedia*, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Krishna>, (accessed on May 15, 2024).

²⁵ Bassuk, *Incarnation in Hinduism and Christianity*, 3.

²⁶ Burnett, *The Spirit of Hinduism*, 104.

²⁷ David A. Brown, *A Guide to Religions* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2006), 70.

concept of Avatara is one of the important doctrines.²⁸ In addition, according to Hindu sacred texts *bhagavata* (god) that is god or gods appearing on any occasion is considered as the Avatara of god.²⁹ This is a clear indication that Hindu sacred texts reveal and present the concept of Avatara as a god or gods manifesting in the human world in different ways.

2:1:3. The Understanding of Avatara

According to Hindu sacred texts, Hindus believe that Avatara is, a deity appearing on earth in earthly forms. First, the supreme deity, the lord of the universe, is descending into the human world by birth to spend an entire lifetime in the world.³⁰ Only a few will recognize him and those who recognize him will be blessed, but many will not recognize him.³¹ Second, there is a Hindu concept of theophany where the Avatars are not born with a physical body. The deity appears on earth as he walks with feet but will not touch the ground. Once his/her task is complete, the Avatara disappears.³² Third, there are other main deities (believed to be the Avatars of the supreme deity) and lower deities. These lower deities are born or appear as Avatars on several occasions.³³ Fourth, the deities will appear on earth to transmit spirituality, transform human lives by touch, look, or wish, and reveal their divinity. This will be a few minutes an hour or a day with an individual.³⁴ Fifth, the deity enters the heart of an individual and manifests his acts in the life as the divine in human person which is also assumed as the Avatara of god.³⁵ Thus, in Hindu understanding, Avatara refers not just to a god or deity but to a wide variety of divine appearances including angels and theophany according to the sacred texts.

2.2. Supreme God and Avatara in the Sacred Texts

In Hindu theology, based on the sacred texts, the Hindu religious traditions have developed the concept of one supreme god just like Yahweh of Jewish-Christianity and Allah of Islam. The rest of the Avatars or gods have emerged from this supreme god. This is evident, as a

²⁸ *Bhagavad-Gita* 4:7-8, Burnett, *The Spirit of Hinduism*, 102-105.

²⁹ Swami Tyangisananda, "Philosophy of the Bhagavata," in *The Culture Heritage of India*, ed. Haridas Bhattacharyya, Vol.III (Calcutta: The Ramakrishna Mission institute of culture, 1997), 284.

³⁰ John B. Carman, *Majesty and Meekness* (Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), 190.

³¹ Swami Vineswarananda, "The Bhagavat-Gita: Its Early Commentaries," in *The culture heritage of India*, ed. C.P. Ramaswami Aiyar, Vol.II (Calcutta: The Ramakrishna Mission institute of culture, 1997), 189.

³² Martien E. Brinkman, *The Non-Western Jesus: Jesus as Bodhisattva, Avatara, Guru, Prophet, Ancestor, or Healer?* (London: Routledge, 2014), 158.

³³ Burnett, *The Spirit of Hinduism*, 130.

³⁴ K.P. Aleaz, *Theology of Religions Birmingham Papers and other Essays* (Calcutta: Moumitha Publishers and Distributors, 1998), 236.

³⁵ Knott, *Hinduism: A Very Short Introduction*, 50.

South Indian theologian and scholar of Hinduism Dhavamony³⁶ puts it, “Vedic Indians extolled their gods to such an extent that each god in turn became the greatest of all and this led to the identification of one god with another or with all.”³⁷ However, according to the earliest Vedic text, there is a concept of one supreme god and from him, other gods evolved, the text says,

They call him Indra, Mitra, Varuna, Agni, and he is heavenly nobly-winged Garutman. To what is One, sages give many a title they call it Agni, Yama, Matarisvan.³⁸

According to the above texts, many scholars interpret it as one god and many names. Dhavamony states that the Vedic people wrestle with the problem of the relationship of the one and the many gods.³⁹ For example, in the creation hymns of Rigveda, there is an indication of one supreme god. He is known as Purusha (ancient man), the Prajapati (husband of the people), the Visvakarma (universal man) the Primeval Male, and the Mysterious Power.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, the quest for a clear understanding of the supreme god continues among the Hindus and the riddle remains unsolved.⁴¹ Probably as another scholar in Hinduism Doniger⁴² rightly points out that within the Hindu traditions, there are different theories related to the supreme god or supreme deities. While Vedic texts present confusing realities, creation hymns do not consist of one theory of the supreme god. Moreover, there is no single theory of creation but several compatible mythological creation accounts or theories are present in Hinduism. No one tried to fit these theories systematically into a canonical doctrine in Hinduism because these theories are confusing in unusual ways.⁴³ Thus, to understand the concept of Avatara, this study is limited to two main theological perceptions regarding the supreme god according to the sacred texts. These two theological perceptions are the identification of the supreme god as Purusha/Prajapati and the Brahman.

³⁶ Mariasusai Dhavamony was an Indian and a scholar in Hinduism and Christian Theology who authored many books in theology and Religion. “Mariasusai Dhavamony,” in *Encyclopedia.com*, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/arts/culture-magazines/dhavamony-mariasusai>, (accessed on May 16, 2024).

³⁷ Mariasusai Dhavamony, *Hindu-Christian Dialogue: Theological Soundings and Perspectives* (Amsterdam: Rodopi Editions, 2002), 14.

³⁸ Rigveda 1: 164.46, Bloomfield, *Four Vedas: Rik, Yajur, Sama, and Atharva*, 148.

³⁹ Dhavamony, *Theological Soundings and Perspectives*, 42.

⁴⁰ Barbara A. Holdrege, *Veda and Torah: Transcending the Textuality of Scripture* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 36-39.

⁴¹ Dhavamony, *Theological Soundings and Perspectives*, 42-43.

⁴² Wendy Doniger is a scholar of Sanskrit literature, Hinduism, Mythology and History of Religions. “Wendy Doniger,” *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wendy_Doniger, (accessed on May 14, 2024).

⁴³ Wendy Doniger, *On Hinduism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 182.

2.2.1. The Supreme God Purusha or Prajapati

The first perception is related to Purusha the Prajapati, believed to be the supreme god in the sacred texts. It is a complex and complicated Hindu theology. The god Prajapati is generally known as the god of the people, the accurate description is: both god and man or God in man.⁴⁴ In Rigveda, three texts are mainly related to Prajapati: the first one is called *Purusha Sukta* (hymn of ancient man).⁴⁵ *Purusha Sukta* says,

A THOUSAND heads hath Purusa, a thousand eyes, a thousand feet. On every side pervading earth he fills a space ten fingers wide. This Purusa is all that yet hath been and all that is to be; The Lord of Immortality which waxes greater still by food. 3 So mighty is his greatness; yea, greater than this is Purusa. All creatures are one-fourth of him, three-fourths eternal life in heaven. With three-fourths Purusa went up: one-fourth of him again was here.⁴⁶

According to the hymn, the Purusha has a thousand heads, eyes, and legs that embrace the entire universe from all sides, in all ten dimensions. All manifestations, in past, present, and future, are held to be the Purusha alone. He is called the Prajapati the supreme Vedic god.⁴⁷ Doniger states that according to the hymn Prajapati created all other creatures, and one-fourth of him is all beings while three-fourths of him is the immortal heaven.⁴⁸ Thus, all these beasts including man are created by him, he is all in all himself and He is the Lord of immortality.

The second Vedic creation description is: the *Nasadiya Sukta* (non-existent hymn).⁴⁹ In the *Nasadiya Sukta*, before creation, nothing existed. There was at first darkness and void. This is what the hymn says,

THEN was not non-existent nor existent: there was no realm of air, no sky beyond it. Was water there, unfathomed depth of water? Death was not then, nor was there aught immortal: no sign was there, the day's and night's divider. That One Thing, breathless, breathed by its own nature: apart from it was nothing whatsoever. Darkness there was: at first concealed in dark new this All was indiscriminated chaos. All that existed then was void and form less: by the great power of Warmth was born that Unit. Thereafter rose Desire in the beginning, Desire, the primal seed and germ of Spirit. Sages who searched with their heart's thought discovered the existent's kinship in the non-existent. What was above it

⁴⁴ Richard Oldale, "Who is Prajapati in Hindu Mythology," (October 8, 2016), <https://www.antaryami.com/hinduism/who-is-prajapati-in-hinduism/>, (accessed on May 15, 2024).

⁴⁵ "Purusha Sukta," *A Little Book of Prayers, Mantras & Gayatris*, https://www.stephen-knapp.com/purusha_sukta.htm, (accessed on May 21, 2024).

⁴⁶ Rigveda 10:90:1-8, Bloomfield, *Four Vedas: Rik, Yajur, Sama, and Atharva*, 569.

⁴⁷ Klostermaier, *A Survey of Hinduism*, 113-115.

⁴⁸ Doniger, *On Hinduism*, 240.

⁴⁹ Nasadiya Sukta is another hymn considered as the 'hymn of creation' concerned with cosmology and origin of the universe in Hinduism. "Nasadiya Sukta," *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nasadiya_Sukta#cite_note-3translations-3, (accessed on May 21, 2024).

then, and what below it? There were begetters, there were mighty forces. Who verily knows and who can here declare it, whence it was born and whence comes this creation? The Gods are later than this world's production. Who knows then whence it first came into being?⁵⁰

There are two important facts: First, for the initial and the last part of the hymn there is no proper and clear interpretation. Doniger remarks, that most creation mythologies including scientific theories of creation must face the problem of ex-nihilo (out of nothingness to a moment of something). This is the same here; in this Vedic hymn, there is nothing, not even the existence of god. This has provoked hundreds of complex commentaries among theologians and scholars, and it raises unanswerable questions and doubts creating many paradoxes.⁵¹ Thus, there is no self-existing god in this hymn and gods too came after creation and they too do not know who the creator is. The hymn raises a question about the very existence of the supreme god and the Avataras of gods.⁵²

Second, in the middle part of the hymn, there was 'one force of heat' that came into 'being (Unit)' and that 'being' is interpreted as the Purusa (ancient man) the Prajapati, believed to be the Supreme Being. Further, the interpretation of other hymns of Vedas is, that the Prajapati, or the sage had a year of tapas or ascetic meditation and with time within himself, the seed or thought was entered into his mind through his power. This Thought or Desire was the primal seed, the germ of the spirit the product of thought.⁵³ The sage searches with wisdom and finds the 'kin of being' in 'non-being' with his heart's thought. Klostermaier, a scholar in Hinduism⁵⁴ interprets, the tapas (literally in Sanskrit means ascetic practice), the thought and the power of the sage are the reasons for the creation.⁵⁵ Prajapati being the creator, through his thought with intelligence of heart and powers, created the seeds and elements that constitute the universe. No human being knows when this act of creation was performed.⁵⁶ This interpretation creates doubt about the supreme god and the Avataras of gods.

⁵⁰ Rigveda 10:129:1-7, Bloomfield, *Four Vedas: Rik, Yajur, Sama, and Atharva*, 592-593.

⁵¹ Doniger, *On Hinduism*, 181-185.

⁵² "Nasadiya Sukta," *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nasadiya_Sukta#cite_note-3translations-3

⁵³ Bibek Debroy, and Dipavali Debroy, *Great Epics of India: Vedas The Rig Veda* (Delhi: Books For All :An Imprint of Low Price Publications, n. d), 99.

⁵⁴ Klaus K. Klostermaier is a Christian Catholic ordained priest and a scholar of Hinduism, Indian history, and culture. "Klaus K. Klostermaier," *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Klaus_Klostermaier, (accessed on May 23, 2024).

⁵⁵ Klostermaier, *A Survey of Hinduism*, 114.

⁵⁶ Debroy, *Great Epics of India: Vedas The Rig Veda*, 99.

Further, the third hymn related to the Prajapati as the supreme god, that is, *Hiranyagarbha Sūkta*.⁵⁷ This hymn says,

IN the beginning rose *Hiranyagarbha*, born Only Lord of all created beings. He fixed and holdeth up this earth and heaven. Giver of vital breath, of power and vigour, he whose commandments all the Gods acknowledge – The Lord of death, whose shade is life immortal. Who become Sole Ruler of all the moving world; He who is Lord of men and Lord of cattle. What time the mighty waters came, containing the universal germ, producing Agni, Thence sprang the Gods' one spirit into being. He in his might surveyed the floods containing productive force and generating Worship. He is the God of gods, and none beside him. The heavens' Creator, Prajapati! thou only comprehendest all these created things, and none beside thee.⁵⁸

This third hymn describes the Prajapati the begotten (10: 121:1- 6). The following verses (10: 121: 7-10) begin with mighty water and speak of the universal germ interpreted as the 'golden germ' producing Agni (literally fire in Sanskrit) the burning seed or embryo in the waters. This golden germ or embryo is called *Hiranyagarbha* (golden womb) or 'golden egg'.⁵⁹ One theory says the Purusha entered into the golden egg and went into meditation for a year and the primeval golden egg was floating on the primordial ocean.⁶⁰ After this as Klostermaier writes the primeval egg was split and sprang the first 'being' who was called the *Visvakarma* the Vedic creator god. Hence this god is called *Hiranyagarbha* whom the hymn addresses as the Prajapati. Through this Prajapati spring the many creatures.⁶¹ The water, germ, egg, thought, and Agni (fire) all have the same connection to the second hymn.⁶² Thus, through these three hymns of Rigveda, Purusha the Prajapati is interpreted as the supreme god in Hinduism who is the root of all other Avataras.

According to Klostermaier, Hindu sacred texts offer various theories related to Purusha. Still, Prajapati is the favorite theme of many later Hindu works.⁶³ The interpreters of the *Hiranyagarbha* hymn say Prajapati is the God of gods who manifested himself as the one and

⁵⁷ Hiranyagarbha Sūkta literally mean 'the golden womb', or 'universal womb' which picturized the "primeval womb" Rig-Veda (10:121:1-10), <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hiranyagarbha> (accessed on May 24, 2024)

⁵⁸ Rigveda 10:121:1-10, Bloomfield, *Four Vedas: Rik, Yajur, Sama, and Atharva*, 589.

⁵⁹ Blair Stark, "Brahma Prajapati," (February 6, 2010), <http://mahavidya.ca/2010/02/06/prajapati/>, (accessed on May 24, 2024).

⁶⁰ Peter M. Scharf, "Creation Mythology and Enlightenment in Sanskrit," *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 48 (2020): 751-766.

⁶¹ Klostermaier, *A Survey of Hinduism*, 115.

⁶² Rig-Veda 10:129:1-7

⁶³ Klostermaier, *A Survey of Hinduism*, 115-116.

only creator of the universe. According to the hymn, devotees say it is him that we worship through our oblations and no one else.⁶⁴

Thus, these three hymns are the foundation for the supreme god in Hinduism. Prajapati is the impersonal supreme god, who is not connected with any other gods. The later developments in Hinduism have connected Prajapati to various gods, goddesses, incarnations (higher gods), and emanations (lower gods), and understand that all incarnations and emanations emerged from this Prajapati. Similarly, this leads to the next main perception of Brahman. The Prajapati was connected to Brahman the one later considered to be supreme god. Through Brahman, Prajapati connected with several gods of the Vedic pantheon. Prajapati refers to any collectivity of creation deities. Many groups of gods are also considered as the Prajapatis or sons or emanations of Prajapati.⁶⁵ Hindus believe even Brahma, Vishnu, and Isvara the main Hindu trinity gods are Avatars of Prajapati. Often Prajapati is referred to as Brahma-Prajapati and Vishnu-Prajapati and so on with all gods. In the Puranas (ancient sacred writings) all the characteristics of Prajapati are depicted to Vishnu (Krishna) the later main Avatara of Hinduism.⁶⁶

2.2.2. The Supreme God Brahman

The concept of Brahman as the supreme god became more popular than the Prajapati in the later days of Hinduism. There are hundreds of hymns and references found in the Vedic literature related to the concept of Brahman.⁶⁷ With the first three hymns (Prajapati hymns) a few important hymns from the Rigveda will be referred to for better understanding. The Rigveda says,

THOU, Agni, shining in thy glory through the days, art brought to life from out the waters, from the stone: thou, Sovran Lord of men art generated pure; Leader art thou, and Kindler for the pious man. Thou art Director, thou the ministering Priest: thou art the **Brahman**, Lord and Master in our home. Hero of Heroes, Thou, **the Brahman**: Lord, art thou, enriching all, O thou God.⁶⁸

Further, a few more hymns describe about Brahman as follows,

⁶⁴ Debroy, *Great Epics of India: Vedas The Rig Veda*, 97-98.

⁶⁵ "Prajapati," in *New World Encyclopedia*, <https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Prajapati>, (accessed on May 20, 2024).

⁶⁶ Bassuk, *Incarnation in Hinduism and Christianity*, 15.

⁶⁷ "Brahman," *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brahman>, (accessed on May 20, 2024).

⁶⁸ Rigved .2:1.1-9, Bloomfield, *Four Vedas: Rik, Yajur, Sama, and Atharva*, 162.

LET US proclaim these generations of the Gods, The **Brahmanspati** produced with blast and smelting, Existence, in an earlier age of Gods, from Non-existence sprang. Thereafter were the regions born. This sprang from the Productive Power. Daksa was born of Aditi, and Aditi was Daksa's Child.⁶⁹

The Holy, whose are earth and heaven, He is the Sage who guides these men, Leader of sacred rites is he. The singers kindle him, the Priest, Agni the Lord of tribes of men, Help us, thou **Brahman**, best of all invokers of the Gods in song, bliss on us, liberal God.⁷⁰

Father of holy hymns, the Father of the earth, Father of heaven: Father of Agni, Surya's generator, the Father who begat Indra and Visnu, **Brahman** of Gods, the Leader of the poets, Rsi of sages, (Rigveda 9: 96.5-6).⁷¹

In the above hymns, two terms appear, *Brahmanaspati* and Brahman. Both terms appear as the sovereign lord of men, Lord, Master, Priest, giver of seeds, food, wealth, Productive Power, Father of all, and one who receives the worship of men. All these terms denote Brahman as the creator god.

Based on these hymns two main forms of Brahman are observed. The first form is, according to Holdrege another scholar in Hinduism,⁷² in creational hymns Prajapati is seen as the creator of the Cosmic Man, Primeval Male, and both immanent and transcendent. The later Vedic conceptions build upon this Prajapati as the singled-out supreme god who identifies himself as the creator. Hence, the Prajapati of the first three hymns, according to other hymns is the creator god Brahman.⁷³ The second form is, as Dhavamony observes, these Vedic hymns seem to conceive of primal existence as a formless and moving mass. Such as: 'non-existent (unknown being),' 'that One Thing,' 'that is Breathless,' 'Primal seed,' 'Warmth Unit,' and 'Germ of Spirit.' Further, there is a reference to: 'Mighty Water,' 'Universal Germ,' 'Producing Fire (Agni),' 'Earth's Begetter and heaven's Creator,' and so on.⁷⁴ Noticing all these elements, Dhavamony asks, "Is this Absolute an impersonal principle or is it a personal God?"⁷⁵ Hence, the second form is considered as the Absolute Principle or Absolute Reality. These two forms were viewed from two perspectives: The first form, Brahman as the creator

⁶⁹ Rigveda 10.72.1-6, Bloomfield, *Four Vedas: Rik, Yajur, Sama, and Atharva*, 557.

⁷⁰ Rigveda 3:13.1-7, Bloomfield, *Four Vedas: Rik, Yajur, Sama, and Atharva*, 195.

⁷¹ Bloomfield, *Four Vedas: Rik, Yajur, Sama, and Atharva*, 503.

⁷² Barbara A. Holdrege is professor of Religious Studies and focus on studies of Hindu traditions. "Barbara a Holdrege," in Middle East Institute New Delhi, <http://www.mei.org.in/jijs-editorial-board/holdrege>, (accessed on May 21, 2024).

⁷³ Holdrege, *Veda and Torah*, 36-39.

⁷⁴ Rigveda 10:29.1-7; 10:121.1-10.

⁷⁵ Dhavamony, *Hindu-Christian Dialogue*, 43.

Prajapati, and the second form Brahman the Absolute Universal Principle. Further, Samartha an Indian Christian theologian thinks that both the terms, Brahman and God are culture-conditioned. One could as well use the terms for a Mystery as for a person, which may be more acceptable.⁷⁶ Thus, the Vedic term Brahman is perceived the supreme god as the ‘Ultimate Principle’ rather a person.

Moreover, the term Brahman is a unique Sanskrit word that implies the highest Universal Principle, the Ultimate Reality, and the final cause of all that exists.⁷⁷ Dhavamony explains, according to some Brahman is the breath of life, to some he is the mind in the human being, yet for some he is ether or space and all things of the external world. In brief, Brahman is both an eternal Being and the source of all the phenomenal universe.⁷⁸ As a result, the concept of Brahman originally referred to creative power or truth in Vedic hymns later recognized as the impersonal principle or absolute reality, the foundation of all phenomena.⁷⁹ Further, in the text, ‘That One,’ that single, primordial Unit, begins to reverberate within itself and gives rise to duality.⁸⁰ Thus, in the devolvement, the creator god Prajapati became duality as both personal and impersonal god Brahman. Through this duality of Brahman the concept of Avatara develops and continues in later Vedic hymns and other sacred texts.

Arvind Sharma a scholar in Hinduism⁸¹ affirms that the Hindu sacred texts establish Brahman as the ultimate reality just as Yahweh is the one ultimate reality in Judaism; God in Christianity, Allah in Islam. Sharma explains how all the Avatars emerged from this one reality Brahman, the Prajapati of the Vedic god. Brahman contains two aspects: *Nirguna* and *Saguna*. The term ‘*guna*’ means distinguished attribute or quality. *Nir* means without; thus in *Nirguna* Brahman does not possess any qualities and is impersonal while *Saguna*, possesses distinguished attributes and is personal. Thus, while *Saguna* Brahman is a person, *Nirguna* Brahman is an impersonal power of God behind *Saguna* Brahman.⁸² Hence, these two aspects

⁷⁶ S. J. Samartha, “The Cross and the Rainbow: Christ in a Multi-Religious Culture,” in *Readings in Indian Christian Theology*, eds. R. S. Sugirtharajah and Cecil Hargreaves (Delhi: ISPCK, 1993), 106.

⁷⁷ “Brahman,” in *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brahman>, (accessed on May 20, 2024).

⁷⁸ Dhavamony, *Hindu-Christian Dialogue*, 43.

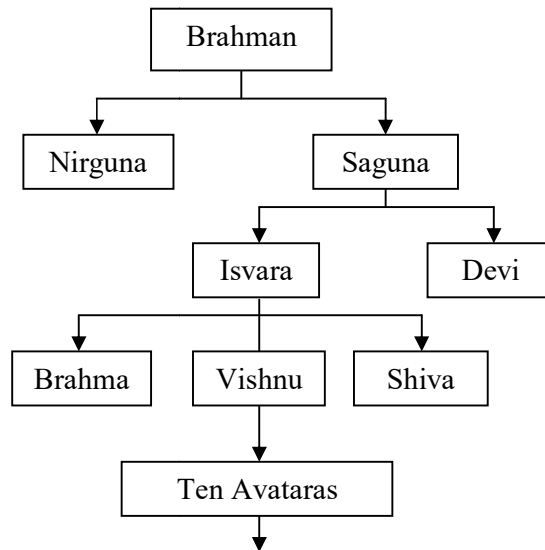
⁷⁹ Knott, *Hinduism*, 16.

⁸⁰ Rigveda 10:29.1-7

⁸¹ Arvind Sharma is a professor of Comparative Religion and his works focus on Hinduism, philosophy of religion. “Arvind Sharma,” in *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arvind_Sharma, (accessed on May 20, 2024).

⁸² Brinkman, *The Non-Western Jesus* 150.

are of the same Brahman. Moreover, the *Saguna* Brahman possesses both masculine and feminine personalities. The masculine is called Isvara, ‘the god of fire’ and the feminine is called *Davi*, the goddess of power (*Sakthi*). According to Sharma, from these two male and female personalities originate the rest of all gods as Avataras of Brahman who related with the Prajapati of the Vedic god.⁸³ According to Arvind Sharma, the next diagram shows the emerging way of Avataras in Hinduism.



1. The Matsya (fish)
2. The Kurma (Tortoise)
3. The Varaha (boar)
4. The Narasimha (the man-lion)
5. Vamana (the dwarf)
6. Parasurama (Rama with the axe)
7. Rama
8. Krishna
9. Buddha
10. Kalkin

According to David Frawley, who is also known as Vamadeva Shastri and a prominent Hindu scholar and proponent of Hindutva, this view is accepted by the Hindu scholars and

⁸³ Arvind Sharma, *Classical Hindu Thought* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), 1-3.

theologians who acknowledge Brahman as the supreme god who possesses dual nature as *Isvara* the personal god.⁸⁴ According to the diagram through Vishnu, the main Ten Avatars of Hinduism proceeds. Thus, all main deities and Avatars are connected to this one Brahman the supreme god and this concept remains in the sacred texts as well as in beliefs.⁸⁵

2.3. The Purpose and Goal of Avatars in the Sacred Texts

According to the Hindu creation hymn Rigveda 10: 90.1-16, supreme creator and creation are inseparable. The hymn says universe itself and Vedas came out of a divine sacrifice of the Prajapati, performed by the gods. According to Rigveda 10:90.5-8, the Purusha (first one) begets Viraj the widespread. Some Hindus consider Viraj as the female counterpart of the primeval Purusha (first Purusha). Further, the first Purusha and Viraj together bring forth Purusha (second one), namely the son Prajapati (ancient man). When the gods together wanted to present a gift in the form of sacrifice to the first Purusha the supreme, the son Prajapati became the sacrifice victim of all gods. They took the son Prajapati and offered him as a sacrifice. Through that great sacrifice, the Prajapati's body parts were divided, and through those parts originated all types of creatures and other worlds. From his body came curds, butter, birds, animals, forests, mantras/hymns, horses, animals that have two tusks, cows, goats, sheep, and so on. From his mouth the Brahmins, from arms *kshatriyas*, from thigh *vaishyas*, and feet *sudras* (four castes of hierarchy). Again his mind became the moon, his eyes became the sun, from his mouth were born gods, from his navel came atmosphere, his head became heaven and feet the earth. His great sacrifice originates from the verses of the Vedas and the entire creation. Since all the gods performed the sacrifice this was considered the most righteous act ever performed.⁸⁶ Thus, according to the Vedic creation hymn, when Prajapati's body was cut into pieces for the act of sacrifice, all creation evolved. It is through one god all creation and Avatars emerged. This is the reason Hinduism is considered a monistic and pantheistic religion. Moreover, since there are numerous gods in the Vedic texts because of Avatars, it is also considered a polytheistic religion. However, Hindu scholars attempted to call Hinduism 'Henotheism or Kathenothesim'.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Frawley, *A Guide for the Global Mind*, 95-96.

⁸⁵ D. S. Sarma, "The nature and History of Hinduism," in *The Religion of the Hindus*, ed. Kenneth Margan (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidoss Publishers Private Ltd, 1996), 9-10.

⁸⁶ Debroy, *Great Epics of India: Vedas The Rig Veda*, 87-88.

⁸⁷ Dhavamony, *Theological Soundings and Perspectives*, 42.

Once creation came into existence, the supreme god wanted to keep his relationship with the creation. This made a way for the Avatara of the supreme god in different ways. To keep the relationship between the divine and the human, according to Vedic tradition god established the sacrificial system for a cosmic operation to maintain the relationship with his creation.⁸⁸ The Vedas insist that humans must repeat this original primordial sacrificial event (Prajapati sacrifice) regularly to renew all aspects of their relationship with gods.⁸⁹ Hence, sacrifices were performed with rituals to please the gods and maintain order and relationship.⁹⁰ It is believed that the supreme Prajapati sustains relationships with every individual human person. He receives their worship, responds to their prayers, and always sympathizes with them. In return, he asks and seeks the same love, worship, and service from the people. When humans continue to perform the sacrificial rituals according to Vedic traditions, they are the devotees of the supreme and considered as righteous people. Once they fulfill their obligation to the gods according to Vedic rituals, god is obliged to fulfill their wishes and answer their prayers which results in gods becoming Avatara and entering into the human world. Thus, the goal of Avatara is to maintain the relationship.⁹¹

The Purpose of Avatara:

The purpose of Avatara can be seen mainly in six ways based on maintaining cosmic order and relationship. First, according to the sacred text, when evil increases and the world is in times of peril and turmoil the people turn hostile and become evil and oppress the devotees, the god enters into humanity as the Avatara in different ways. As the Avatara, he destroys the evil powers, removes evil, relieves the world from sin, and delivers his devotees from trouble.⁹² According to a sacred text,⁹³ once a devotee asks the supreme god, “What manner is your birth and of what nature is your body? What is the cause of your birth, when does it occur, and what is its purpose?” The answer from the deity was whenever the righteous order of life presented in the Vedas is declining and evil is increasing, the divine Lord with his own free will manifests himself as an Avatara and destroys the wicked and restores the declining Vedic religion.⁹⁴

⁸⁸ Doniger, *On Hinduism*, 236-238.

⁸⁹ “Prajapati,” in *New World Encyclopedia*, <https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Prajapati>, (accessed on May 30, 2024).

⁹⁰ Brown, *A Guide to Religions*, 67.

⁹¹ Dhavamony, *Theological Soundings and Perspectives*, 46.

⁹² Dhavamony, *Theological Soundings and Perspectives*, 73-75.

⁹³ Bhagavad-Gita 4:7-9; 6: 6-19.

⁹⁴ Carman, *Majesty and Meekness*, 191-192.

Second, the purpose of Avatara is to provide access to his devotees so that he could be known and seen.⁹⁵ Carman states that according to Hindu philosopher Ramanuja's comments the primary purpose of Avatara is to become accessible to his devotees who are fervently seeking him as their refuge and who are distressed because they are unable to comprehend him. The Lord has supreme compassion and love for his devotees and to become a refuge for all, he becomes Avatara. Through the Avatara he/she allows his preeminent worshipers to behold him as he/she is, to see his deeds, and to listen to his words. Thus, he/she moves out of total inaccessibility and makes access to both gods and humans to see him and worship him which is often called *darsana* of god.⁹⁶

Third, the purpose of Avatara is seen as god coming to save his/her devotees in times of trouble. This could be a period, a day or an hour. Carman quoting another Hindu scholar writes that to kill the oppressor of the devotees the god the first one of the Vedas left his primordial form of effulgence there and was born here. To kill and destroy the enemies of his devotees god with his own will born from other wombs and descended into human and became Avatara many times which are recorded in the Vedas. As many times he became an Avatara or emanations, he asked his devotees to worship in those names.⁹⁷

Fourth, when the devotees pray to the gods and desires are expressed to the deity, their wishes are fulfilled. In deep devotion to the deity, when devotees earnestly desire to see him and talk to him, the deity is moved by their prayers. Hence, the supreme one will compel other gods to grant their favor and this may end up other gods entering into the world as emanations to fulfill the prayers. The prayer or petition is offered through offering the special sacrifice through Agni (sacrificial fire), meditation, effectual ascetic life, and earnest petitions. On such occasions, gods take human forms and appear time and again to bless the devotees and fulfill their wishes and desires.⁹⁸

Fifth, several times the deity enters into the world for his own benefit as well as the benefit of the souls. He enters as the person (Avatara) to turn the people to him, worship him, and get

⁹⁵ Bassuk, *Incarnation in Hinduism and Christianity*, 23.

⁹⁶ Carman, *Majesty and Meekness*, 192-193.

⁹⁷ Carman, *Majesty and Meekness*, 193-194.

⁹⁸ John B. Noss, *Man's Religions* (London: The MacMillan Company, 1980), 121-122.

close to him. As the Avatara, the divine person manifests all his virtues and divine power through his life and deeds. When he was present, his earnest seekers would adhere to him in worship and service. The deity reveals his intense interest and love for the souls and enables them to reach their final liberation. The divine relationship between the deity and devotees helps them get close which may result in devotees merging with the supreme deity to have final liberation from the world.⁹⁹

Sixth, there are some stories in the sacred texts that speak of god coming as Avatara to save the world and preserve the righteous people to replenish the earth. The mythic period in the Hindu system is a never-ending cycle of creation, preservation, and destruction. At the end of the period, the whole creation is dissolved through flood or destruction while the righteous are saved and replenished. In this theory, there are many divisions and sub-cycles and the important one is called *Kalpa* (time)¹⁰⁰ which is equal to 4320 million years. Within this *Kalpa* falls four major ages or *yugas* called *Krita*, *Treta*, *Dwapara*, and *Kali*. In all these ages god becomes Avatara, performing the dissolution and replenishing the universe. One such occasion was well known in mythology where god took the form of a huge fish to swallow the Vedas and righteous people to save them from flood. Similarly, at the end of the Kali age, god will appear as the *Kalki* to dissolve the present age and begin the new righteous age. Many Hindus are hoping for this to happen any time.¹⁰¹

Hence, the purpose of Avatara varies in many ways in Hindu tradition. While several times the deity is believed to be born with different names and his personality is multiplied into many deities, other times he can also appear in the form of a creature. In some cases, the Avatara was born and lived a whole time on earth and in other cases, he is like an angel who appears with a task, completes, and disappears. In Hindu tradition, according to the sacred texts, all types of divine appearing in the world are considered the Avataras of God.

Conclusion:

The Avatara is a deity coming to the world by birth or appearing to his devotees in human or earthly form. The Vedic people believe in the one supreme god Prajapati who was later

⁹⁹ Dhavamony, *Hindu-Christian Dialogue*, 75.

¹⁰⁰ A Kalpa is a long period of time in Hindu and Buddhist cosmology, generally between the creation and recreation of a world or universe.

¹⁰¹ Daniel E. Bassuk, *Incarnation in Hinduism and Christianity*, 16-45.

described as the Brahman, the universal principle. This Brahman's dual nature leads to the Avatars of the supreme trinity and from this trinity evolve numerous Avatars and emanations of gods. The purpose of Avatars is to maintain relationships, destroy evil, show favor, protect and bless devotees who are in danger, and make a way for the final liberation of devotees to merge with the supreme deity. However, there is no clear indication of who is that one supreme deity or god in the Vedic texts and what is the role of so many Avatars in human history, nor are devotees' experiences in this world clear. Moreover, how Avatars relates to other religions and the salvation or liberation of whole humanity still remains a question in Hindu sacred texts. In the next chapter the focus will be on the incarnation of Christ based on the Apostle John's Prologue and the Reformed view. The study may lead to ascertaining the differences and similarities related to the sacred texts, the supreme god, many Avatars and the incarnation of Jesus Christ as the true goal and purpose of humanity.

Chapter Three

The Understanding of the Incarnation According to John 1:1-18 and the Reformed View

The concept of the incarnation is one of the fundamental Christian doctrines. In Christian theology, the relationship of humans with God relies on the concept of incarnation. Through incarnation, the second Person of the Trinity becomes a human being to restore the relationship with humans and demonstrate His love for humanity. Incarnation is the bridge and connecting link between God and humans. This divine act of incarnation makes people realize that there is a living God who created the universe with a purpose and has an eternal plan of salvation to restore and bring re-creation in fallen humanity. Hence, the concept of the personal God is understood based on the concept of incarnation.¹⁰² This chapter will focus on, Jesus Christ and His incarnation according to the Gospel of John 1:1-18. The purpose and importance of incarnation is to answer the question in our research: What is the concept and understanding of the incarnation of Christ according to John 1:1-18 and in the Reformed understanding of the Dutch theologians Herman Bavinck and Gerrit Cornelis Berkouwer?

3.1. Descriptions of Terminology-Incarnation

The Bible is the authoritative source for all Christian doctrines and concepts. The concept of incarnation is developed based on the Bible. The word incarnation does not appear directly in the Bible. However, the concept was developed to indicate the incarnation of Christ in the early church history. Later the term was circulated and used by Christian writers from the fourth century to the present day.

3.1. 1. Etymology of the Term Incarnation

According to the International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, the term incarnation was used and developed in the fourth century by the Latin church fathers and it continued to be used in the modern days in Christian writings including Western theology.¹⁰³ The term derived from the Latin word, *'incarne'* means 'in the flesh' which is found in the New Testament (Jn. 1:14;

¹⁰² Gerald O Collins, "The Incarnation: The Critical Issues," in *The Incarnation*, eds. Stephen T. Davis, Kendall and Collins (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 26.

¹⁰³ C. Brown, "Person of Christ," in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), 781-787.

3:6; 6:63; Romans 7:18; 8:3-6; Galatians 5:17; 1Jn. 4:2; 2 Jn. 1:7).¹⁰⁴ The word *incarne* is the combination of two Latin words, 'in' and 'caro.' Webster's New International Dictionary gives the meaning, 'in' means in, and 'caro' means *carnish* or flesh. This means invested or clothed with flesh or bodily nature and form, embodied in a human form.¹⁰⁵ Therefore, the Latin word, in and *caro* means 'in flesh' and speaks of the act of assuming flesh. In the original Greek is 'egeneto sarx' (ἐγένετο σὰρξ-became flesh). The term 'sarx' is expressed in human sinful weak flesh for the divine becoming flesh, an ugly reality close to the Hebrew term 'basar'. The human flesh is sinful, mortal, and earthly because of the fallen nature.¹⁰⁶ In Christ, God Himself graciously took the human flesh, human nature, and came as human.¹⁰⁷ This act of God is found in the New Testament statements, which speak about the person and the work of Christ who took the human flesh and came into this world.¹⁰⁸ Incarnation is therefore in Christ, God Himself came to earth in human form.

3.1.2. The Development of the Concept of Incarnation in the Christian Theology

The origin and development of the concept can be categorized into three aspects. The first is associated with revelation, preparation, and messianic prophecies. The incarnation of Christ is one of the main themes from Genesis that continues throughout the Old Testament books. The promise to Abraham Isaac and Jacob includes the promise of Christ, that is, "and in you, all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen. 12:1-3) and the "kings will come from you," (Gen 17:6, 16; 35:11; 49:10-11; Num. 24:17-19, 2 Sam. 7).¹⁰⁹

The second thought proceeds from the New Testament where the incarnation of Christ is referred to in the writings of the Apostles, particularly in John's writings (1 John 1:1-3). Peter says we did not follow cunningly devised fables, but we were eyewitnesses of Christ's glory (2 Peter 1:16-18). Moreover, the disciples accepted Him as their Lord and God (Jn. 20:28), prayed to Him (Acts 7:59, 1:21), proclaimed Him, and were baptized in His name (Acts 2:38, 8:16, and 19:5). Later the Apostle Paul had a revelation of Christ that He is above all things

¹⁰⁴ J.I. Packer, "Incarnation," *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, J.D. Douglas ed., (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1998), 686.

¹⁰⁵ *Webster's New International Dictionary* (Springfield: Merriam Webster Inc., 2002).

¹⁰⁶ Packer, "Incarnation," 686-687.

¹⁰⁷ Merrill F. Unger, "Incarnation," in *Ungers Bible Dictionary*, ed. Merrill F. Unger (Chicago: Moody Press, 1967), 522.

¹⁰⁸ Packer, "Incarnation," 686.

¹⁰⁹ Wolter Rose, "Messianic expectations in the Old Testament," In *Die Skriflig* 35/2 (2001): 275-288.

and through Christ, all things were created (Phil. 2:5-11, Colo 1:16-18).¹¹⁰ All these examples that they believed that in Jesus Christ God came as human being.¹¹¹

The third thought originates from the beginning of early church history. There were many controversies in the early church.¹¹² When the controversy continued, and many heresies crept into the church, after much debate in the first ecumenical Council of Nicaea in 325 AD and the first Council of Constantinople in 381 AD the church position was declared.¹¹³ The Nicaea-Constantinople Council declared that:

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God of true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father. Through him, all things were made. For us men and our salvation, he came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and became truly human.¹¹⁴

Therefore, Christ's incarnation implies that He is true God and true man.¹¹⁵ Christ is God without ceasing to be God when He appeared as man, which John asserts in the Prologue of his Gospel (Jn. 1:1-18). Therefore, Christ's incarnation means that He came in the condition of created physical and psychical life, not as Theophanes.¹¹⁶

3.2. The Incarnation of Christ According to John 1:1-18

In the New Testament, the revelation and preparation becomes reality through Jesus Christ the Word (Logos) taking upon Himself our human nature in the human Person. In the OT, Christ is the main subject and the prophecies are the preparation for Christ's incarnation in human history. The revelation, prophecies, God's ongoing involvement in human history, and His plan for salvation are completely visible realities in the incarnation of the Word. However, this research will limit the study to the Gospel of John Chapter 1: 1-18 for

¹¹⁰ Brown, "Person of Christ," 785-786.

¹¹¹ James Oliver Buswell, "Incarnation," in *Pictorial Bible Dictionary*, ed. Merrill C. Tenney (Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1975), 373.

¹¹² Packer, "Incarnation," 687.

¹¹³ Buswell, "Incarnation," 373.

¹¹⁴ Michael F. Bird, *Evangelical Theology: A Biblical and Systematic Introduction* (Michigan: Zondervan Publishing, 2013), 461.

¹¹⁵ Unger, "Incarnation," 523.

¹¹⁶ Packer, "Incarnation," 686-687.

understanding Christ's incarnation. Further, the research will analyze the pre-incarnate Word Christ in the first part and Christ became human and lived in the world in the second part.

3.2.1. Pre-incarnate Word

The gospel of John begins with the Prologue of the Word, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). In the beginning, (in Greek, 'en arche') was the Word (Greek 'ho logos') and the Word was with God, (Greek 'ton theon' the God- with the article) and the Word was God, (Greek 'theos'). Many books of the Bible derive their name from the beginning words. The first book of the Bible begins with; 'In the Beginning' is called Genesis. In the Septuagint (LXX) the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, the first words of Genesis are 'en arche' in the beginning. The gospel of John begins with the same models connecting the beginning of the Scripture, the creation account, and the words of God when God spoke His words in creation. The Word of God or the *Logos* of God involved in the beginning of creation.¹¹⁷ In the beginning, the *Logos* identifies the eternal Word (of God) or *Logos* (of God). It affirms that the *Logos* existed before creation. John writes that the Word is not the beginning but it is the beginning of the beginning before anything came into being.¹¹⁸

The Apostle John also had in mind Jewish and Greek worlds of his time while writing about the *Logos*. The Jewish concept of the *Logos* of God is rooted in the Old Testament. Jewish rabbis often referred to God in terms of His Word and they spoke of God Himself as 'the Word of God.' Whenever they received a message from God, to speak about that message, they spoke it as 'the Word of God' with the Hebrew word '*dabar*'. It could be a command, reprimand, or announcement spoken directly or through a prophet (Gen. 15: 1, 4).¹¹⁹ In Exodus 19:17, when Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God it was interpreted as 'Moses brought the people to meet the word of God. Hence, in the mind of the ancient Jews, the phrase 'the word of God' could be used to refer to God Himself. The Greeks believed that the world is highly volatile, but is under the control of *Logos*. John, however, introduces that the Greek philosophers saw *Logos* as the Power that puts the chaotic world into a perfect order. For them, *Logos* is the 'Ultimate Reason' that controls all things

¹¹⁷ David F. Ford, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary* (Michigan: Baker Academy, 2021), 21.

¹¹⁸ George R. Beasley, *Word Biblical Commentary, Vol 36* (Texas: Word Books Publishers, 1987), 8-11.

¹¹⁹ Beasley, *Word Biblical Commentary*, 7-10.

and maintains all things. John introduces the *Logos* as the Person who exists before the beginning and He is the cause for all things.¹²⁰

John continues, “Word was with God in the beginning” (John 1:2) explaining that the Word was truly equal with God. At the same time there is a distinction between the Word (*Logos*) and God. This indicates, that the *Logos* is the divine Being who is eternal and this Being is God (Word was God). At the same time, “the *Logos* was with God” refers to God the Father who is distinct from the *Logos*. Thus, God the Father and the *Logos* are equally God yet remain distinct. Chrysostom puts it “Not in God but with God, as a Person with Person, eternally co-exists.”¹²¹ Moreover, in Greek, a noun is always used with the definite article, if the definite article is not used; it becomes like an adjective and describes the character and the quality of the person. John writes “Word was *Theos*”, without the definite article which speaks of the Word as of the very same character and quality and essence and being of God. Hence, the Prologue distinguishes between God and the Word while emphasizing their unity and individuality.¹²²

John continues by connecting the *Logos* of God to the creation account of Genesis. Genesis reveals the creative work of God through His Word. John writes the same more vividly, “All things were made through him, without him was not anything made that has been made” (John 1:3). The Word not only existed with God but was intimately involved in the creation of all things. In other words, the *Logos* is the Creator God and without Him, nothing has been made. The Word created all created things; hence, He is an uncreated Being.¹²³ While in Genesis God is said to have created all things, and in John’s account, God is the Word who created all things. Hence, according to John, God’s Word is God Himself. In other words, the *Logos* of God is God Himself.¹²⁴ Hence, the spoken *Logos* of God in Genesis are essentially related to the *Logos* of God in John that the same *Logos* of God would come as a human being in the flesh.¹²⁵ Further, John asserts also that the *Logos* is the Life, Light, and source of

¹²⁰ Leon Morris, *Reflections on the Gospel of John, Vol 1* (Michigan: Baker Book House, 1986), 1-6.

¹²¹ Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Co.2012), 42-44.

¹²² Andrew J. Byers, *Ecclesiology and Theosis in the Gospel of John* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 34-36.

¹²³ Ian A. McFarland, *The Word Made Flesh: A Theology of the Incarnation* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2019), 219-220.

¹²⁴ Stephen J. Wellum, *God The Son Incarnate: The Doctrine of Christ* (Illinois: Crossway, 2016), 202.

¹²⁵ Steven A. Mckinion, *Words, Imagery, & the Mystery of Christ: A Reconstruction of Cyril of Alexandria’s Christology* (Leiden: BRILL, 2000), 23-24.

all creation which are also themes of the Genesis creation account (John 1: 4-13). Thus, the *Logos* is the Creator God who created all things and maintains all things.¹²⁶

3.2.2. Incarnate Word

The next striking statement in John's Prologue is, "And the Word (*Logos*) became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). This is the centerpiece of the Prologue and a startling statement that inspired numerous theologians and scholars to write books and many critiques to wonder upon this, to understand the Incarnate Word in Person. The reason is simple and not a surprise, after explaining that the *Logos* is the Creator God, John writes that the Creator God became a human Person in human history. The verse is a centerpiece in the passage that John 1:1-13 moves towards this while John 1:15-18 points back towards this.¹²⁷ The whole passage, John 1:1-18 presents that Christ the *Logos*, the Creator in Genesis took the human form and lived in the world. According to Moody, a theological commentator, John presents the Word becoming flesh as a historical fact. Further, he also underscores that this concept of gods coming to earth or taking human form was not unknown in pagan antiquity and John's language differentiates this from such manifestations. In John's Prologue, once the Word became flesh, the Word was replaced with the Person Jesus Christ, and from this point Jesus Christ is the Son (God) who is in the bosom of the Father and dwelt among the people as fully human without any change.¹²⁸

Further, John then writes that in God's act, Christ became a human Person. On the one hand, how that happened one may not and cannot discover because it was a wholly divine act of God. On the other hand, the terms used indicate that the *Logos* came as a human Person.¹²⁹ Christ came in truly human flesh that He was capable of experiencing all human life and suffering in His nature as God that birth, life, suffering, and death might be said to be his because it was His own body.¹³⁰ The first phrase, 'the Word became flesh' in the original Greek is '*egeneto sarx*' (*ἐγένετο σὰρξ*-became flesh).¹³¹ In the New Testament, the flesh is

¹²⁶ McFarland, *The Word Made Flesh*, 219-220.

¹²⁷ James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John: An Expository Commentary Five Volumes in One* (Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1985), 77-79.

¹²⁸ Smith, D. Moody, *Abingdon New Testament Commentaries: John* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 58.

¹²⁹ Mckinion, *Words, Imagery*, 42-43.

¹³⁰ Katherine Sonderegger, "Cyril of Alexandria and the Sacrifice of Gethsemane," in *Kenosis*, eds. Paul T. Nimmo and Keith L. Johnson (Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2022), 130-131.

¹³¹ "John 1:14" in *Bible Hub*, <https://biblehub.com/text/john/1-14.htm>, (accessed on June 14, 2024).

used as a contrast with what is spiritual and good, (John 3:6; 6:63; Romans 7:18; 8:3-6; Galatians 5:17). The Word became in the same manner as human flesh in the sense that Jesus was in the human flesh. John was probably aware of his context with Jews, Greeks, and heretics of his time. Jews generally thought of a higher form of God and angelic beings appearing in human form. The ancient Greeks believed in gods of superhuman forms (bodies) like Zeus and Hermes. There was a widespread heresy of Gnosticism linking with Docetism (body is either absent or illusory). Hence, John's words clearly imply that the Word had a true ordinary human body and not the angelic, superhuman body.¹³²

The second phrase, 'and dwelt among us' in Greek, '*kai eskēnōsen en hēmin*' (*καὶ ἐσκήνωσεν ἐν ἡμῖν*).¹³³ The word *eskenosen* meaning 'dwelt' or 'tabernacled' is familiar to Jewish people. During the time of Moses in the wilderness wanderings God commanded Moses to build the tabernacle so that He may dwell among them (Exo. 25:8). Moses built a beautiful tent where God through Divine *Shechinah* glory condescended to dwell among the people of Israel and later in the Jerusalem temple. People beheld the presence and the glory of God in their midst. In a similar tone, John asserts that God became human in Jesus to dwell among the people. Thus, John connects the idea and context to God dwelling among the people just the way He dwelt among His people in the wilderness.¹³⁴

The third phrase, 'we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth,' speaks strongly of human witnesses about the human incarnated Christ. While John speaks 'we' referring to him and other disciples he continues about the witness of John the Baptist (John 1:7-8, 15).¹³⁵ Here, John writes about the testimony of eyewitnesses. John uses the noun witness four times and is aware that it is a legal concept. The word 'beheld' is a stronger term than the words, 'saw' or 'looked.' This word 'beheld' maintains that disciples know Him with bodily eye not in visions or illusion in majestic way, study Him in the literal way, and consider Him as having a physical body yet full of glory and truth.¹³⁶ At the same time, John the Baptist testifies, 'he saw His glory, the glory belonging to the only begotten of the Father.' John the Baptist's witness was a serious thing, establishing the truth about Christ and making ground for faith in Christ that He is the divine and human Person.

¹³² Morris, *Reflections on the Gospel of John*, 8.

¹³³ "John 1:14" in *Bible Hub*, <https://biblehub.com/text/john/1-14.htm> (accessed on June 14, 2024).

¹³⁴ Moody, *Abingdon New Testament Commentaries*, 58-59.

¹³⁵ Ford, *The Gospel of John*, 26.

¹³⁶ Morris, *Reflections on the Gospel of John*, 21-25.

After testifying about Christ's divinity and humanity John establishes that Christ has declared the unseen God the Father through Him (John 1:18). Once again John emphasizes, "No one has seen God at any time but the only begotten Son" (John 1:18). The oldest manuscripts read begotten God (in Greek *monogenes theos*) while others read Son (*huios*) and Son is preferred because of begotten Son (In Greek *monogenes huios*).¹³⁷ Once again John affirms that Jesus is not the Father, yet Jesus is with the Father and He is the same as the Father and declares the same essence of the Father. The phrase 'in the bosom of the Father' signifies that the Father and the Son belong to the same and oneness of essence. Thus, Christ's disciples acknowledged Him that He is the Image of the invisible God (Col. 1:15, Heb. 1:3, 2 Cor 4:4).

Thus, according to John's Prologue, Jesus Christ is truly God who exists in eternity before the creation of all things and He is the *Logos* through whom all things were created. The same *Logos* became human and lived in the world with true human flesh. This is the incarnation of Christ an undeniable history and proven reality that is beyond any human comprehension.¹³⁸

3.3. Selected Reformed Theologians' Views on the Incarnation of Christ

Over the centuries, there have been many discussions about the meaning of the incarnation. Here we focus on two Reformed scholars to examine a few important views related to Christ's incarnation. Both contribute to understanding the purpose and importance of the concept in the midst of heresy and human limitation to understand the incarnation. The reason I opt for these theologians is, first they are great contributors to the role of theology in the Dutch Reformed churches and across the world. Second, they are not much known in the Indian context, but their works and their vast knowledge of the Scripture can possibly contribute to the Indian church in terms of Christian theologies. Third, these two theologians seem to be familiar with the Indian context to a certain extent. Bavinck makes explicit references to Vedic traditions,¹³⁹ Caste System,¹⁴⁰ and to Krishna and Buddha who are known to be great Avatars of the supreme god of Hinduism.¹⁴¹ Bavinck was also known to be a

¹³⁷ Moody, *Abingdon New Testament Commentaries: John*, 62.

¹³⁸ Byers, *Ecclesiology and Theosis in the Gospel of John*, 34-36.

¹³⁹ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, Vol 3*, ed. John Bolt (Michigan: Baker Academic, 2006), 330-331.

¹⁴⁰ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, Vol 3*, 523.

¹⁴¹ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, Vol 3*, 239, 284.

teacher of mythology as a pastor and professor at the theological university at Kampen.¹⁴² Similarly, Berkouwer is a well-known Dutch theologian in the Netherlands with an outstanding knowledge of the Scripture, church history, confessions of the church, and dogmas. Berkouwer's writings certainly enhance one's knowledge of the church handling the controversies related to Christ's incarnation. Undeniably his knowledge will help the Indian church when accessing his writings and contributions.¹⁴³ Both of them are known to have contributed much to the Christian and non-Christian world with their ideas and knowledge and their works are studied and explored in theological education circles in our days.

3.3.1. Herman Bavinck's View on the Incarnation

This research seeks to glean vital points made by Herman Bavinck related to the incarnation. In this section, the next paragraph includes a brief introduction to Herman Bavinck because it is necessary for the Indian Context and Indian readers. Second, important points of Bavinck's view on the incarnation will be discussed.

Herman Bavinck's Background

According to Eglinton, Bavinck was the leading dogmatician of the Dutch Neo-Calvinist revival at the beginning of the twentieth century. Eglinton states, that one of the most striking features of Bavinck's dogmatics and theology has been one subject: God himself.¹⁴⁴ Another Dutch theologian professor Hans Burger states that Bavinck is one of the two great theologians of Neo-Calvinism and a contemporary to the other great Neo-Calvinist Abraham Kuyper which makes Bavinck a theologian worthy of attention.¹⁴⁵ Bavinck was regarded as part of a constellation of great modern Protestant theologians.¹⁴⁶ Hence Bavinck deserves to be introduced to the readers, particularly to the Indian readers where in the researcher Indian context this dynamic, spiritual giant and great dogmatician is not much known.

Herman Bavinck was born on December 13th, 1854 in Hoogeveen, the Netherlands to Dutch parents. Bavinck was shaped by strong pietistic Reformed spirituality. Bavinck began his

¹⁴² James P. Eglinton, "Some benefits of going organic: Herman Bavinck's theology of the visible Church," in *Theology in Scotland*, XVII.1 (2010): 23-36.

¹⁴³ G. C. Berkouwer, *The Person of Christ: Studies in the Dogmatics*, Vol. 6 (Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing, 1954), 60-85.

¹⁴⁴ Eglinton, "Some benefits of going organic," 23-36.

¹⁴⁵ Hans Burger, *Being in Christ: A Biblical and Systematic Investigation in a Reformed Perspective* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2009), 87.

¹⁴⁶ James Eglinton, "Herman Bavinck," in *T&T Clark Handbook of Neo-Calvinism*, eds. Nathaniel Gray Sutanto and Cory Brock (London, New York: Bloomsbury 3PL, 2024), 199-200.

theological studies in Kampen and later moved to Leiden University and completed his doctoral study in 1880. He was ordained and appointed as a pastor in Franeker, in the rural setting of Friesland in the Netherlands. Later Bavinck became a professor at the Theological University at Kampen where he taught several subjects in Dogmatics, Polemics, Ethics, Encyclopaedia, Classics, Mythology, Philosophy, and Greek. In 1888 he married Johanna Adriana Schippers and they had one daughter, Johanna.¹⁴⁷ Bavinck continued his teaching work in Kampen and in the period between 1895 and 1901, his four-volume magnum opus *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* (Reformed Dogmatics) was first published. Apart from Reformed Dogmatics, some of Bavinck's publications include, 'Synopsis Purioris Theologiae' in Latin, 'The Science of Sacred Theology,' 'The Catholicity of Christianity and Church,' 'The Common Grace,' 'Philosophy of Revelation,' and several shorter essays and articles.¹⁴⁸

In 1902, Bavinck moved to Free University of Amsterdam where his life was marked by a prolific and wide-ranging output in literature and public life. From 1905 to 1907 he was the President of Kuyper's Anti-Revolutionary Party.¹⁴⁹ Many streets and schools had been named in his honor throughout the Netherlands. Bavinck also delivered the prestigious Stone Lectures at Princeton Theological Seminary in the United States.¹⁵⁰ Many referred to him, as a born philosopher, while others think he was a great Christian theologian and philosopher. Bavinck being such a scholar was a humble spiritual man who had a heart for God and had a deeper quest to be a child of God in all things.¹⁵¹ Thus, undoubtedly all these make him a spiritual giant who contributed much in the fields of theology.¹⁵²

Herman Bavinck's View on the Eternal Purpose of God

Bavinck reveals himself as a student of Holy Scripture whose thoughts are shaped by the Bible. While his main subject is God Himself, his theological framework is built on the Triune God and His purpose for His creation. According to Bavinck, God's purpose is one and it is universal not focused to one family or community but to the whole human race.¹⁵³

¹⁴⁷ Eglinton, "Some benefits of going organic, 23-36.

¹⁴⁸ Eglinton, "Herman Bavinck," 205-207.

¹⁴⁹ Eglinton, "Some benefits of going organic, 23-36.

¹⁵⁰ Bruce R. Pass, *The Heart of Dogmatics: Christology and Christocentrism in Herman Bavinck* (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2020), 12.

¹⁵¹ Eglinton, "Herman Bavinck," 200-209.

¹⁵² Eglinton, "Some benefits of going organic, 23-36.

¹⁵³ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, Vol 3*, 18.

First, according to Bavinck, the eternal purpose of God includes all humanity and incarnation is the core part of it. All works of God in humanity, such as the incarnation, redemption from sin and misery, bringing new creation to humanity, and establishing His kingdom are rooted in the eternal foundation of the counsel of God. The incarnation was not initiated at the time of Christ's coming but was already included in the counsel of God. Hence, this is not limited to the people of Israel but to the entire humanity. The doctrine of incarnation is one of the core themes of his dogmatics having universal significance.¹⁵⁴ Hence, Bavinck states, the ideas of incarnation and a Mediator between humanity and the divine occurs in all religions, in the form of priests, kings, Avatars (lower deities), and spirits. However, Christ's incarnation is not a genotype or parallel to any of those religions. Moreover, in Bavinck's opinion, there is an 'unconscious prophetic tendency' and a general expectation in paganism that one day good will overcome evil and there will be a righteous kingdom. This noble and beautiful expectation and expression points and connects to one specific Person that is Jesus Christ.¹⁵⁵ Christ's incarnation is not just an idea or concept but He is the Son of God known only through special revelation. The incarnation is related to God's creation and the presupposition and the preparation for the incarnation is found in the creation of humans in God's image. In the Scripture, God's progressive revelation and many acts of God are centered on the incarnation of Christ that reveals the *Logos* of God. The first man Adam was a type of Christ, the promise of redemption of humanity, the appearance of the Angel of Yahweh, the Son of Man in Daniel and Scripture offers a multifaceted picture of Christ (John 8:56, 1 Cor. 10:4, 9) that points out God's preparation for Christ's incarnation.¹⁵⁶

Hence, Bavinck affirms that the incarnation of Christ is the eternal plan of God. And, he asserts that the doctrine of Christ is the central point of dogmatics and "the mystery of godliness" (1 Tim. 3:16). From this mystery all Christology proceeds and incarnation is the central part of it. If Christ is the incarnate Word, then the Incarnation is the central fact of the entire history of the world, prepared from ages, and has its effects throughout eternity. Jesus is the pre-cosmic Person, ordained of God, prepared to come into the human world, revealed in the Scriptures, displayed his divine attributes (full of glory, grace, and truth) in this world of sin, and maintained his honor as God.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁴ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, Vol 3, 212-216.

¹⁵⁵ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, Vol 3, 238-240.

¹⁵⁶ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, Vol 3, 233- 240; 277.

¹⁵⁷ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, Vol 3, 274.

Second, according to Bavinck, incarnation is the work of Trinity. The incarnation of Christ has its presupposition and foundation in the Trinitarian being of God. Trinitarian essence is the presupposition and condition of the incarnation of God. Bavinck's thoughts on creation, Christology, soteriology, and redemption stand within a Trinitarian context.¹⁵⁸ The eternal God exists in three persons, namely the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This is the fundamental Christian doctrine of God. This is not three gods but One God existing in three persons eternally. In the divine Being of the Trinity, the Son occupies the Second position. Father remains the Self-existing eternal God while the Holy Spirit succeeds the Son in their cooperative acts and works. Thus, it is the Son being the image of God takes the place of incarnation, sent by the Father and conceived by the Holy Spirit to bring salvation to humanity and restore creation. Hence, incarnation is the co-operative work of the Trinity prepared from eternity for the whole humanity.¹⁵⁹

In the third place Bavinck holds that incarnation is the sole picture and image of creation. Bavinck's opinion is that since it is not possible to create something identical to God Himself in essence, God created finite creatures and gave to them limited eternal thoughts and infinite power. The creation of man in God's image was in fact a preparation for the incarnation of Christ. After creating humans in His image, He speaks to them and makes Himself known to them and understood by them.¹⁶⁰ This is an act of condescension by which humans can understand God which makes it possible for God's self-revelation and reveals His preparation for incarnation. Thus, in the revelation, the incarnation is certainly different from all others matters; it is the crown and completion, and all revelations gather around the incarnation as the highest, richest, and most perfect act of self-revelation of God. Thus, the creation of humans and the incarnation are closely related and Christ is the second Adam who would appear to complete all revelations of God.¹⁶¹

In the fourth place, according to Bavinck, humanity will be under a single Head and there will be one Mediator between God and humans. Adam was already a type of Christ in creation which is a clear preparation for the incarnation. Therefore, even the failure of Adam, sin, and fall do not change God's plan. In fact, when Adam fell, God already has a plan for redemption, restoration, and re-creation of humanity under Christ the Head of all creation.

¹⁵⁸ Burger, *Being in Christ*, 89.

¹⁵⁹ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, Vol 3*, 274-275.

¹⁶⁰ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, Vol 3*, 277-278.

¹⁶¹ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, Vol 3*, 277-279.

Adam was appointed as head so that Christ the second and last Adam could take the first Adam's place after the restoration. Only in Christ humanity may find a way to salvation, restoration, and re-creation and Christ is the Mediator of heaven and earth.¹⁶² Thus, the incarnation of the Son of God, the second Person of Trinity is not accidental because of sin and salvation. Bavinck argues against all those who speculate, that God proceeded to the work of creation without a plan and incarnation is the result of sin that necessitates redemption. Bavinck asserts, God had one eternal plan and decree that even man's influence, fall, and sin cannot modify. The redemption, restoration, and re-creation work of God are included within that one plan in God's counsel and therefore nothing can change the plan of God. Hence, Christ is the one Mediator for humanity and end of all things which is accomplished through His incarnation (1 Cor. 15:45-47, Eph. 1:10, 21-23; 5:31-32; Col. 1:15-17). Bavinck claims the incarnation did not take place immediately after sin and fall. Many centuries have passed between the first sin and Christ coming. Scripture speaks of the fullness of time (Eph 1:10; Gal.4:4) which points to the plan and determination of God.¹⁶³

Fifth, Bavinck explains that this preparation for the incarnation is seen in the history of God's revelation in the Scripture. The historical unfolding of revelation is the self-preparation of the *Logos*. This self-preparation takes the form of a continuous coming that begins with the act of creation and continues after the fall in salvation history.¹⁶⁴ In the Scripture preparation is seen in the election of Israel and God's dealing through the Angel of the Covenant, theophany, prophecy, and miracle. The Scripture (*Logos*) prepared the world, including Jews and Gentiles for His coming in the flesh. The Word (*Logos*) prepared the whole world, including Jews as well as Gentiles, for his coming. Bavinck acknowledges that John's Prologue completes that history of revelation to the world presented in the New Testament.¹⁶⁵

Finally, Bavinck affirms the struggle of the early church that the truth of God himself in the flesh was too rich and too deep to be immediately absorbed into the Christian consciousness and to reproduce a clear formula to provide proof against all human understanding and errors related to incarnation. As a result, many heresies, and debates about Christ's dual natures rose in the early church. Some of these are Gnosticism, Nestorianism, Eutychianism, and many others. So, there was tension in understanding and accepting Christ's incarnation. Bavinck

¹⁶² Burger, *Being in Christ*, 92-96.

¹⁶³ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, Vol 3*, 278-279.

¹⁶⁴ Pass, *The Heart of Dogmatics*, 50.

¹⁶⁵ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, Vol 3*, 280-281.

continues that it was not just the struggle of the early church, but this continued in Catholicism and Lutherans. Even modern theologians and thinkers questioned the Gospel writings, church creeds, and Chalcedon's definition of the incarnation.¹⁶⁶ However, while the dual nature of Christ is denied by many, the Scripture teaches no other doctrine but Christ the Word is human and divine in One Person. According to Bavinck, this doctrine of the church is firmly established in the Scripture and church faith.¹⁶⁷

According to Bavinck, in Christianity Christ occupies a very different place than any other religious leaders such as Krishna, Buddha, Zarathustra, and others. In Christian religion, the true fellowship between God and humans can be maintained in no other way than by the confession of Christ as the true God. Often in the Scripture and other religions sometimes angels, kings, authorities, and godly men are called "gods." However, with Christ, the case is very different. Moreover, there are false religions with incomplete revelation which may represent a good and positive moral content. Therefore, often a false religion could be a false appropriation of the true revelation of God. Similarly, some religious leaders such as Buddha, Mohammed, Gandhi, Ramakrishna, and other godly leaders ought not to be regarded as instruments of Satan, but as vessels of common grace.¹⁶⁸ However, Bavinck declares, to Christ, a personal eternal preexistence is attributed; of Him, it is said that he was God, existed in the "form" of God, was the effulgence of God's glory, the only-begotten Son of God, the image of the invisible God, indeed, God above all, to be praised forever.¹⁶⁹

3.3.2. Gerrit Cornelis Berkouwer's View on the Incarnation

Gerrit Cornelis Berkouwer is a Dutch Reformed theologian who wrote a series of Studies in Dogmatics. In this section, an introduction to Berkouwer will be introduced in the first part. This is important for the Indian context and Indian readers because he is not much known in the Indian Context. In the second part, the research draws some core points from Berkouwer's discussions related to incarnation and the church's confession of faith.

G. C. Berkouwer's Biographical Note

According to Gijbert van den Brink, Gerrit Cornelis Berkouwer was one of the leading Dutch Protestant theologians of the twentieth century and a pivotal figure in neo-Calvinism.

¹⁶⁶ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, Vol 3, 253-264.

¹⁶⁷ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, Vol 3, 282-283.

¹⁶⁸ Pass, *The Heart of Dogmatics*, 78.

¹⁶⁹ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, Vol 3, 284-286.

He was one of the key players in shaping neo-Calvinism's theological outlook. He was a prolific writer of both academic and general works. Translations of many of his books into English prove that his writings and insights had a wide range of readers both at national and international levels. Berkouwer was a prominent memorable influential person both in the Netherlands and among evangelical theologians.¹⁷⁰

Berkouwer was born in Amsterdam, the Netherlands in 1903 and his father was a Reformed school teacher. He studied at the Faculty of Theology of the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam which was close to Hague where he lived. He was influenced by the neo-Calvinist theology of his time and after completing his studies in 1927, he became a minister in the Frisian village of Oudehorne. The same year he married Cornelia Elisabeth Rippen (1904-82), with whom he had nine children. In 1931 the family moved to Amsterdam where he served as a minister of the Reformed church in 'Watergraafmeer' until 1945. In 1932 he graduated after completing his dissertation and in 1940 he was appointed as a special professor for 'the newer theology' filling the vacant place of Herman Bavinck to reconnect theology among believers. He was a full-time professor, teaching dogmatics until his retirement in 1973.¹⁷¹

Berkouwer's contributions include many published books, notably his two volumes of *Studies in Dogmatics*. Berkouwer also yielded a lasting impact in the United States. He was influential through his contributions to Dutch Reformed newspapers, weeklies, and other journals. He was continuously involved in theological dialogues with theologians.¹⁷² He also played a vital role in Dutch church life and his friendly and non-polemical character and his striving for harmony and mutual understanding were well recognized and appreciated. He was instrumental in the ecumenical dialogue and was a part of the formation of Reformed Ecumenical Synods. Berkouwer was one of the few theologians known among the Roman Catholic churches as well as among the Protestant churches.¹⁷³

¹⁷⁰ Gijssbert Van den Brink, "G. C. Berkouwer," in *T&T Clark Handbook of Neo-Calvinism*, eds. Nathaniel Gray Sutanto and Cory Brock (London: Bloomsbury 3PL, 2024), 275-86.

¹⁷¹ Brink, "G. C. Berkouwer," 275-276.

¹⁷² Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, "G. C. Berkouwer," in *Creative Minds in Contemporary Theology* (Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1966), 64-65.

¹⁷³ Brink, "G. C. Berkouwer," 276-278.

Berkouwer's View on the Incarnation

In Berkouwer's Dogmatics, the incarnation is one of the main themes in the work of Christ. Berkouwer's writing demonstrates the importance of the incarnation of Christ in the history of humanity and the life of the Christian church. He discusses the revelation, the doctrine of incarnation, and church Counsels against many heresies, similar to Herman Bavinck. This research will focus on a few of his important contributions, namely factors related to Christ's two natures, incarnation and redemption of humanity from sin, and concealment.¹⁷⁴

The early church was confronted the challenge of holding on to the incarnational concept and Christ's dual nature in the midst of many controversies. Berkouwer discusses how the early church handled this situation and established the truth of Christ's incarnation in the church's history. Berkouwer begins his argument with the divergent ideas that people had about Christ while He was on earth. Jesus asked His disciples, "Who do men say that the Son of man is?" The answer to this question varied and it was not surprising that everyone thought of Him differently. However, when Peter says, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God," Jesus says it was the revelation given by the Father (Matt. 16:17). Thus, Berkouwer argues, Christ cannot be explained through human rational insights or infallible intuition but is known only through the divine revelation of God. Hence, according to Berkouwer the whole subject matter of Christ or Christology is intimately woven into the mystery of revelation.¹⁷⁵

The conflict about the identity of Christ and His Person as both divine and human is not new to the modern world. According to Christ's question to His disciples, different views on Christ began when He was on earth and continued with various forms in different ages. However, Berkouwer excluding other periods discusses mainly the fourth, the fifth, and the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This research sketches a few views from the discussions that are related to Christ's incarnation.¹⁷⁶

First, among many issues that church faced, Berkouwer addresses the crisis and controversy of the dual nature doctrine, that is, the confession of the church that Jesus Christ is, 'truly God and truly man' (Latin-*vere Deus, vere homo*). It was a subject and object of radical criticism in the church's history. Berkouwer affirms that the church defended the denial of

¹⁷⁴ Hughes, "G. C. Berkouwer," 65-70.

¹⁷⁵ Berkouwer, *The Person of Christ, Vol. 6*, 14-15.

¹⁷⁶ Berkouwer, *The Person of Christ, Vol. 6*, 15-18.

Christ's dual nature against numerous heresies with the earnest words of warning that he who does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is led by the spirit of the Anti-Christ (1 John 4:3).¹⁷⁷ Further, Berkouwer discusses several important points of crisis and criticisms related to Christ dual natures. However, given the scope and limitations, it is not possible to discuss all these points in this research except a few important points that are related to the research for the Indian Context.

Berkouwer notes that the dogma of incarnation arose gradually in the early church with the church father Irenaeus. While the term is unknown in the gospels, the concept is understood as soundly biblical. The fact is, if Jesus Christ is God, then He existed before he became man. Hence, the church continued to believe in the divine person of Christ. However, the two natures in one Person triggered much confusion in the fourth and fifth centuries. In the midst of puzzlement, the church continued to inquire into the Scriptures, and even at the risk of being accused of pride, the early church was earnest in believing what John and Paul (Philip 2:5-11) explained about Christ.¹⁷⁸ In the fourth century, the church condemned the heresy of Arius in 325 AD at Nicea, and Apollinaris in 381 AD at Constantinople. The church stood faithfully to its ground and after an exhausting struggle against all heresies, Christ being truly God and truly man was fully present in the church confessions.¹⁷⁹

Further, according to Berkouwer, in the fifth century church defended against Nestorius and Eutyches. After this, the church began to reflect on the relationship between these two natures, which led to the decisive and influential fixation of Christological doctrine at Chalcedon in the year 451. Berkouwer observes,

“Chalcedon, in 451, rejected both the confusion and the separation of these natures. Antithetically opposed to the heresies, it taught that Jesus Christ was truly God and truly man; as touching his Godhead homo-ousios with the Father, and as touching his manhood homo-ousios with us his brethren. Of the relationship between the two natures it declared that they were united: without mixture and without change, without division and without separation; to this was added that each nature, even in the union, retains its own properties.”¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁷ Berkouwer, *The Person of Christ*, Vol. 6, 22-26.

¹⁷⁸ Berkouwer, *The Person of Christ*, Vol. 6, 54-56

¹⁷⁹ Berkouwer, *The Person of Christ*, Vol. 6, 60-67

¹⁸⁰ Berkouwer, *The Person of Christ*, Vol. 6, 67-69

With this statement the church declared that Jesus Christ is truly God and truly man and He is the Divine *Logos*, became human in history and lived among the people as God and man.¹⁸¹

Berkouwer's second important contribution which is relevant for this research is his emphasis on the work of Christ. Berkouwer states, "unless we know why Christ came in human flesh, our historical knowledge will not profit us." For him, the soteriological aspect is a major issue.¹⁸² Incarnation is intrinsically linked to the redemptive purpose of God. Berkouwer quotes Melancthon: "To acknowledge Christ is to acknowledge his benefits." Berkouwer argues that God becoming flesh has implications for salvation, to redeem and restore humanity. God sent Jesus for the salvation of humanity. In the work of Christ, He did things historically that benefited sinners and opened up the grace of God to all who come to Him. Jesus died for the sins, was buried, and raised to conquer death. He further quotes Calvin who said, "That the whole of our salvation, and all the branches of it, are comprehended in Christ," Moreover, he points to Luther's words, "Jesus being God and Man used his office on behalf of sinners and poured out His love and became the Saviour and Redeemer."¹⁸³ Chalcedon's confession has the full expression of, 'in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself' (2 Cor. 5:19). According to Berkouwer, the revelation of God points out the sins of the people and the misery of the entire human race which is incapable of self-redemption and digging its own grave. Hence, the revelation discloses the plan of redemption and God's mercy in His act to save sinners and salvation will be His work alone (Isa. 1:18).¹⁸⁴

The third aspect of Christ's incarnation which this research draws from Berkouwer is Christ's sinlessness. Berkouwer argues that, on the one hand as a reality, every human life lies in sinfulness and no one is free from sin. However, Christ being human, is it correct to elevate Him above the 'structure' and 'struggle' of man? The Scripture indicates that He was tempted in all and yet did not sin. Berkouwer points out the same Scripture evidence and argues based on three witnesses that give strong evidence of Christ's sinlessness. First, there are explicit references to His disciples testifying that 'Christ knew no sin' (2 Cor. 5:21), "did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth" and Christ died as "the righteous for the unrighteous"

¹⁸¹ Berkouwer, *The Person of Christ, Vol. 6*, 72.

¹⁸² Hughes, "G. C. Berkouwer," 86-91.

¹⁸³ Berkouwer, *The Person of Christ, Vol. 6*, 104-111.

¹⁸⁴ Berkouwer, *The Person of Christ, Vol. 6*, 139-140.

(1 Peter 2:22; 1 Peter 3:18). Second, the power of Christ's holiness also brings forth from the unclean spirits, the acknowledgment: "I know you who thou art, the Holy One of God" (Luke 4:34). Third, from all directions people witness to him (John 10:36) and Pilate finds no crime, Judas says he has betrayed innocent blood, the centurion speaks of him as a righteous man. Moreover, the public action of Christ and his holy self-consciousness which filled him throughout the entire course of his life is evident. Christ once asked his opponents: "Which of you convicts me of sin?" (John 8:46). Jesus Christ was tempted yet lived a holy righteous life that He was in the sinful world yet without sin.¹⁸⁵

The fourth aspect to draw from Berkouwer is God's revelation in concealment: Christ's entire life is that of the incognito. This is considered as the ineffable mystery of the act of God that the fullness of God is hidden or concealed in Christ. God never reveals Himself directly but always indirectly, that is: in a human being.¹⁸⁶ Berkouwer gives two reasons to explain the concealment of God in Christ when He appeared as human. First in the Scripture, the word 'mystery' is used in various ways. Christ was preached as the 'mystery of God revealed in the flesh' (Col. 2:2; 1 Cor. 2:1, 7; Col. 1:27; 1 Tim. 3:6). Second, elaborating on the views of Emil Brunner, Berkouwer states, that Christ's incarnation is directly antipodal to all pagan religions and mythology of theophany and concept of mysterion, the popular mystery concept. In paganism, the idea of incarnation is always the 'immediate knowability of God. The transcendent deity suddenly appears to men in a marvelous theophany and becomes directly knowable. This is different from Christ and His approaches are in another mode. As a human, the condescension of God is the theme of the Bible. God enters as a human with complete earthly reality and Paul calls it, the Divine Word in the likeness of sinful flesh most distant from the divine glory. In Calvin's words, Christ came to us, not in the glory and majesty of the form of God, but in the form of a servant. In the incarnation, Christ could not abdicate his deity but for a certain period he concealed it, lest it should appear in the weakness of the flesh. Hence, Christ's incarnation was the concealment of the divine in the non-divine. In Christ, there is the concealment of his glory and absolute unknowability that Christ can be mistaken for any man at all. Thus, Christ will not be known to anyone immediately but only by faith one can understand Him.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁵ Berkouwer, *The Person of Christ*, Vol. 6, 240-242.

¹⁸⁶ Hughes, "G. C. Berkouwer," 80-83.

¹⁸⁷ Berkouwer, *The Person of Christ*, Vol. 6, 330-337; 353-355.

Berkouwer explains that truth remains: when Jesus was on earth, many did not understand Him or the mystery of Him being God. The epistles say that the knowledge of Christ is not something easily understandable, they speak that no man can say that Jesus is Lord, but in the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:3). To the natural mind and heart Christ and His life is not fully transparent in deepest meaning and can become an offence or foolishness to Jews or Greeks (1 Cor. 1:18, 23). Paul writes about this hidden mystery, the wisdom of God, “None of the rulers of this world hath known” (1 Cor. 2:8). However, decisive fact is that He is revealed through revelation and Scripture, just as He revealed to Peter and other disciples (Matt. 16:17; Jn. 1:1-18; 20:28) He will continue to reveal to those who seek Him in faith.¹⁸⁸

Conclusion:

Summing up, the term incarnation is God Himself in Christ, coming condescendingly in the human flesh. While the ideology in Vedic texts and Western theology seems the same, Christ’s incarnation is once for all and unparalleled to Hinduism with its many Avatars. Further John’s Prologue affirms the supreme God, the *Logos* coming in the flesh. Vedic texts and John’s Prologue speak of the concept of the supreme God and incarnation. However, there seems difference in unknown Person or Principle in Vedic texts while John writes about the revelation of the *Logos* coming in human history. The purpose of Avatars in Hinduism seems to be maintaining the relationship with creation in the form of a sacrifice and Avatars of gods. However, according to Reformed theology, incarnation is essential to God’s eternal plan of salvation and it is the work of the Triune God. The eternal God has planned, prepared, and in the fullness of time revealed in the human Person as the Head, the Mediator, and the Savior of the entire creation and humanity. God has prepared all things, revealed clearly in the Scripture and fulfilled in human history. This is vindicated in the first Adam in creation and the second Adam Jesus Christ in re-creation. The next chapter focuses on the Indian Christian theologians’ understanding and opinion about the concept of Avatars and the incarnation of Christ. Indian Christian theologians’ understanding may give more clarity about Avatars and Christ’s incarnation.

¹⁸⁸ Berkouwer, *The Person of Christ*, Vol. 6, 344-347.

Chapter Four

Indian Christian Theologians Understanding of the Christ's Incarnation

Indian Christian theologians understand Christ's incarnation based on the Biblical teaching. They understand John's Prologue that the pre-incarnate Word is God incarnated in flesh and became human in Christ. However, the translation of the term and phrase in John 1:14, 'the Word became flesh' in Indian languages needs clarification. In various Bible translations, most of the translated terms are close to the term Avatara of Hinduism. Hence, this chapter focuses on the understanding of Christ's incarnation according to John 1:14 through the lens of two selected Indian Christian theologians' views to answer the sub-question: How do Indian Christian theologians explain the unicity of Christ's incarnation in the Hindu Context?

4.1. Understanding of Christ's Incarnation According to John 1:1-18.

In the understanding of Indian Christian theologians, the content and meaning of John's Prologue remain the same whereas the translated Indian terms give various meanings. First, the term 'Word or *Logos*' in John 1:1 are '*Vakya*' (word),¹⁸⁹ '*Vachana*' (word or letter or letters),¹⁹⁰ '*Shabda*' (a word with voice or sound), and a few others.¹⁹¹ These Indian terms were well accepted by the Christian theologians.¹⁹² Second, the phrase "the Word became flesh" is '*Naraavatara*' (*Nara-Avatara*; human in flesh),¹⁹³ *Dehadari* (human with the body),¹⁹⁴ *Sariradari* (human with the human body), and others.¹⁹⁵ All these terms are very close to the term Avatara of Hinduism and are used widely for the Hindu concept of Avatara. So, using these same terms in the translations for Christ's incarnation is acceptable due to unavailability of better terms, at the same time, it is debatable and a concern among Indian Christian theologians. The simple reason is, this raises a question about whether Christ is the Avatara of God like the concept of Avatara of Hinduism or is He different.

¹⁸⁹ *The Holy Bible, Kannada (New Testament)*, (Bengaluru: The Bible Society of India, 2010), 107.

¹⁹⁰ *The Holy Bible, Hindi (New Testament)*, (Bengaluru: The Bible Society of India, 2021), 130.

¹⁹¹ *The Holy Bible, Telugu (New Testament)*, (Bengaluru: The Bible Society of India, 2016), 81.

¹⁹² R. C. Das, "People's Stories and their Theologies," in *Reading in Indian Christian Theology, Vol.1* (New Delhi: ISPCK, 1993), 128-129.

¹⁹³ *The Holy Bible, Kannada*, 107.

¹⁹⁴ *The Holy Bible, Hindi*, 130.

¹⁹⁵ *The Holy Bible, Telugu*, 81.

Third, though debatable, Indian Christian theologians accept and acknowledge the use of the term Avatara for Christ's incarnation. The reason is, the Indian religious reading of John's Prologue brings the text to pre-understanding with the religious tradition to discover in it the deeper meaning of incarnation in a comprehensible way. This not only brings to Indian familiarity with existing knowledge, but it also helps to understand the unexpectedly sophisticated meaning of the pre-incarnate Word.¹⁹⁶ According to Vandana, an Indian Christian Theologian, the goal of using these terms (with existing meaning) in translation and theologizing is to help the Indians understand Christ. This draws the reader beyond confusion and doubts to know Him with deeper understanding. Fourth, according to Vandana, John's Prologue (John 1:3-18) revolves around 'Creation-Incarnation-Resurrection and New Creation' which suits the Hindu's idea of 'Creation-Avatara-Realization.' Vandana continues with remarking, that the contrast principles of truth-untruth, light-darkness, life-death, and the right to become children of God found in John's Prologue fits in with India's desire for 'passover' *from asat to sat* (untruth to truth), *tamasoma to jyoti* (darkness to light) from *mrtyu* to *amrtam* (death to life). All this is conducive to the evoking of meaningful theology. Christ as the Avatara of God appeals to the Indian mind and heart as He is more than mere human.¹⁹⁷ Thus, Indian Christian theologians understand Christ's incarnation as the pre-incarnate *Logos* the second Person of the Trinity who came as human. Moreover, they do accept that Christ could be introduced to Hindus as an Avatara of God. In fact, there are a few more reasons to use the term Avatara for Christ.

4.1.1. Reason for Using the Term Avatara for Christ in John 1:14

According to Batumalai, an Indian Christian theologian, there are many barriers to translate the message of Christ in Indian languages. One of them is selecting a term that has a similar concept and ideology that is communicable and suits biblical doctrine of incarnation. If this basic concern is not followed, communication may end up in failure without passing on the right message to the reader. Therefore there was a need for Indian religious ideological term to present Christ's incarnation in the translation.¹⁹⁸ Another Christian theologian, Robin Boyd

¹⁹⁶ George Soares Prabhu, "The Historical-Critical Method," in *Reading in Indian Christian Theology* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2000), 187-189.

¹⁹⁷ Vandana, "Water Symbolism in the Gospel of St. John in the Light of Indian Spirituality," in *Reading in Indian Christian Theology*, 200-203.

¹⁹⁸ S. Batumalai, *An Introduction to Asian Theology* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1991), 246.

states, “Effective communication of the Biblical message to the reader depends on the effective use of the religious vocabulary with which reader is familiar.”¹⁹⁹

Thus, it required translators and Indian Christians to use Indian terms that have similar ideology and thought for Christ’s incarnation. Indian Christian theologians such as Russell Chandran and others think that though Hindu Avatara differ from the Christian incarnation, the basic ideology and the meaning remain the same.²⁰⁰ Hence, Bible translators were right in translating John 1:14 with Hindu terminology. Newbigin, speaking from his rich experience says that it is important to use the familiar terms to communicate Christ’s incarnation. He states his opinion in a logical way; every missionary knows that it is impossible to communicate Christ without using the word “God.” If one is talking to a person of a non-Christian religion, one is bound to use one of the words in their language, which is used to denote God. By using the word, the preacher is taking the non-Christian term, ideology of the hearer as the starting point. Thus, without this, there is no way of communication and this is the same with incarnation.²⁰¹

Moreover, to remove the barrier, it is necessary to use the term with different shades of biblical meaning that match with Christ’s incarnation.²⁰² Every human being usually grasps new concepts only in terms of the old, the unknown in terms of the known concept.²⁰³ God’s supernatural revelation needs to be communicated to its receivers in their terms, meanings, and language. Hence, using the term Avatara in the Indian context is a matter of communication.²⁰⁴ This is the need for contextualization, making the context of the Christian message meaningful to the Hindus at the same time remaining faithful to the biblical content. Thus, using the Hindu ideology of Avatara for incarnation is to remove the barrier to introducing Christ and to help them understand Christ. In this sense, the Bible translators had no choice but to use the term Avatara for John 1:14.²⁰⁵

¹⁹⁹ Robin Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2009), 203.

²⁰⁰ Russell Chandran, “Development of Christian Theology in India: A Critical Survey,” in *Reading in Indian Christian Theology*, 4-12.

²⁰¹ Newbigin Lesslie, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society* (London: SPCK, 1989), 173.

²⁰² Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology*, 203.

²⁰³ Sunand Sumithra, *Christian Theology from an Indian Perspective* (Bangalore: Theological Book Trust, 2002), 3,4.

²⁰⁴ Sumithra, *Christian Theology*, 2.

²⁰⁵ Sumithra, *Christian Theology*, 4.

4.1.2. Different Opinions on Using Avatara for Christ's Incarnation

Most of the Indian Christian Theologians agree that in content and essence, Avatara is different from incarnation. Only to express the basic idea of the John's Prologue, the term Avatara can be used. This is a debate among the theologians. Some theologians openly oppose the use of the term. Keshub Chandra Sen and Brahmabandha Upadhyaya think that Indian terms can be used for a Christian message. However, Avatara for Christ has no significance or value. The simple reason was that Avatara is related to Hinduism which believes in countless Avataras. Calling Jesus the Avatara of God makes Him equal to one of such low-level gods or gods of Hinduism which is far from the truth. This prevents others from knowing Christ's uniqueness.²⁰⁶

Nevertheless, several other Indian Christian Theologians definitely accept the use of the term for Christ's incarnation. Sadhu Sunder Singh a well-known indigenous theologian fully accepted the idea of Avatara; he used the term Avatara and vividly for John's Prologue and illustrated it in his preaching. According to him the word was made flesh, and all can see the living Father in the incarnation of Jesus Christ.²⁰⁷ V.Chakkarai says, "Jesus of history is to us the Avatara of God."²⁰⁸ Appaswamy finds that the term Avatara can helpfully and fruitfully be applied to the incarnation of Christ.²⁰⁹ Nehemiah Goreh points out, that there are certain ideas in orthodox Hinduism, which are not found in rationalism and which point beyond themselves to their fulfillment in Christ, such ideas are the possibility of miracles, and above all the idea of incarnation. These conceptions can and should be regarded as a preparation to communicate Christ's incarnation.²¹⁰

So Indian Christian theologians support the use of the term and concept with a warning and condition. First, according to John's Prologue, Christ is the *Logos* of God who came in the flesh once and for all. Hence, He meets the Indian people not from outside, but within their thoughts, faith, culture, and language and they will know Him.²¹¹ Second, According to Appaswamy, it must be clear that the term Avatara can be used only to express the idea of the

²⁰⁶ Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology*, 263.

²⁰⁷ Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology*, 98.

²⁰⁸ Vengal Chakkarai, "The Historical Jesus and the Christ of Experience," in *Readings in Indian Christian Theology, Vol. I*, eds. R.S. Sugirtharajah & Cecil Hargreaves (Delhi: ISPCK, 2000), 78.

²⁰⁹ Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology*, 127-128.

²¹⁰ Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology*, 55-56.

²¹¹ Klostermaier, *Readings in Indian Christian Theology*, 123.

incarnation of Christ. Third, Appasamy states, there must be a clear distinction drawn between Hindu Avatara and Christian Avatara of Christ because they are not the same. Fourth, Appasamy warns, all those who use the term must avoid all types of Docetism.²¹² Finally, when the term is used, it must adhere to the Chalcedon formula presented in AD 451 in the Chalcedon Council. That is, Christ is the Son of God born as a human having two natures and continues to live as God-Man. Thus, with these suggestions most Indian Christian theologians affirm that the term Avatara can be used for Jesus Christ in the full sense as the incarnation of God.²¹³

4.2. Selected Indian Christian Theologians' Views on the Incarnation of Christ

For many decades there was a lot of debate over the concept of incarnation and Avatara and many think the concept of Avatara can be used with the missiological concern. The present research focuses on two Indian Christian Theologians' views to find out the positive and negative aspects of the concept of Avatara for Christ's incarnation in the Indian context. Both scientists are well-recognized among Indian Christian theologians and have contributed much to Indian Christian theology. First, Vengal Chakkarai was considered as a thinker and theologian in South India. He was involved in a movement called, 'Rethinking Christianity.' This was a group in South India concerned with redefining the Christian faith in Indian terms and relating it to the cultural heritage of the country. Chakkarai's first book was titled 'Jesus the Avatara which had a significant contribution to indigenization and contextualization.'²¹⁴ Second, Mariasusai Dhavamony is another Indian Christian theologian constantly involved in interreligious dialogues with other religions, especially Hinduism. He is a member of the International Association of Sanskrit and Tamil Studies an expert in the area of interreligious studies and a known Christian theologian in South India.²¹⁵

4.2.1. Vengal Chakkarai's View on Christ's Incarnation

This research seeks to find some essential factors related to the incarnation from Vengal Chakkarai. Hence, before moving on to his views on Avatara and on the incarnation of Christ, he deserves to be introduced briefly to the reader. Vengal Chakkarai was born in a Hindu family in Madras (presently known as Chennai) on 17 January 1880. According to A.

²¹² Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology*, 127-129.

²¹³ Sumithra, *Christian Theology from an Indian Perspective*, 237.

²¹⁴ Chakkarai, "The Historical Jesus and the Christ of Experience," 78.

²¹⁵ Mariasusai Dhavamony, "The Buddha as Saviour," in *Buddhism and Christianity*, eds. Claude Geffre and Mariasusai Dhavamony (New York: The Seabury Press, 1979), 125.

A. Yewangoe an Asian theologian, Chakkarai knew Hindu religion and its spiritual aspiration deeply. He studied in a Christian college and became interested in Christ and was baptized in 1903. He was a lawyer by training yet was attracted to the Danish Mission and joined the mission and became a prominent member of the rethinking mission in India. Initially, he began to discover how a believer receives salvation (Moksha) through Christ.²¹⁶ He was a member of the Presbyterian Church (Later Church of South India) and recognized as a prominent theologian and his Christology was called, 'Christology of the Spirit.' He wrote books and articles, along with his book 'Jesus the Avatara,' 'The Cross and Indian Thought,' and his other writings such as 'The Theology of Chakkarai,' 'The Guardian' are published. It has been said that Chakkarai's contribution to Indian theology was his understanding that, "Jesus was the most egoless person in history and therefore the most universal of all."²¹⁷ He was one of the well-known trio of South Indian theologians, Appasamy, Chenchiah, and Chakkarai who had deep experience of Hinduism and became Christians because of their deep study of the Christian faith.²¹⁸

Vengal Chakkarai's Views:

In his Christology Chakkarai devotes much attention to the concept of Avatara and the historical Jesus. For the research a few important elements would be drawn to understand the concept of Avatara and incarnation. Chakkarai was well versed with Hindu Vedic terms and concepts and with his knowledge, he believes that it is correct to say that Jesus is the divine Avatara of God.²¹⁹ However, with his emphasis on the historical Jesus Christ, he differentiates the Hindu Avatara from the Christian incarnation. According to Chakkarai the Avatara of Jesus Christ is fully different from the Avataras of Hinduism. Chakkarai argues this based on his idea of God's self-revelation in Christ with the concept of immanence.²²⁰ First, the Brahman is understood to be unmanifested and how can a religion begin with the unmanifested *nirguna* Brahman? For a Hindu, generally, god is the transcendent and immanent, Brahman the unmanifested and transcendent cannot be considered very satisfactory. Thus, the God whom we are in search of is not only a transcendent but also imminent and present in our human experience. If there is a god, who is not related to our human experience is simply non-existent for us. Such a non-existent god cannot constitute the

²¹⁶ A. A. Yewangoe, *Theologia Crucis in Asia* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1987), 59.

²¹⁷ Chakkarai, "The Historical Jesus and the Christ of Experience," 78.

²¹⁸ Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology*, 165.

²¹⁹ Yewangoe, *Theologia Crucis in Asia*, 61.

²²⁰ Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology*, 168.

Avatara and such one might represent and reflect the ultimate Brahman the non-existent.²²¹ However, Jesus Christ is manifest in human history and is both transcendent and immanent. Brahman is the unmanifested and Jesus is the manifested and we see God in the face of Jesus and find the nature, knowledge, and wisdom of God in Jesus. Thus, God was revealed fully in the Person of Jesus to humanity in human history and Christ is the true Avatara of God.²²²

Second, according to Chakkarai John's gospel contains the most explicit statement of the doctrine of the incarnation. According to John's Prologue, incarnation posits a duality and unity at the same time. The Hindu doctrine of Avatara is a kind of identical and based on a monistic understanding of reality. According to the deity Krishna's statement, 'I am Brahman.' While Hindu Avatara is pure metaphysics, John's is moral, spiritual, and historical. The *Logos* of God is eternally with God and God and God became human in unity and duality. Hence, there is a difference between the incarnate Word and the non-incarnate Lord. The incarnation of Christ leads to the understanding of the Christian view of the personal God. Our concern is not with the Absolute Principle but with God in human experience and nature. The Christian incarnate God is a pure unity. For purposes of analytical investigation, they can be separated and studied in isolation, but their very essence, as even God, consists in a moral and spiritual and to use the language of Indian thought, one and one without a second. The Godhead is a society of distinctions and incarnation is initiated and executed by that one God.²²³

Third, Chakkarai explicitly points out that the concept of incarnation or Christ Avatara differs from the Hindu concept of Avatara. The Hindu sacred text presents the deity as Avatara coming again and again and keeps recurring periodically with multiple divine manifestations and this does not happen with Christ. Chakkarai asks, what is the real meaning of these avatars in human history and religious experience? The answer entirely depends on the Indian minds who believe in those avatars. However, the Christ Avatara took time, and the concept of incarnation and John's Prologue point out those realities. Christ came as a human in history only once and will not repeat this same.²²⁴

²²¹ V. Chakkarai, *Jesus the Avatar* (Allahabad: Christian Literature Society for India, 1926), 212-215.

²²² Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology*, 167.

²²³ Chakkarai, *Jesus the Avatar*, 212-215.

²²⁴ Chakkarai, *Jesus the Avatar*, 127-132.

Fourth, Chakkarai observes, that Christ Avatara begins with eternity, continues from one stage to the next, from eternity to historical and spiritual through the devotees (church-believers). In Hinduism, Avatara appears in times of crisis, such as a time of injustice or oppression and when such a situation is over, Avatara is no longer needed and thus, disappears. The Avatara fulfills the task and returns to the 'Ultimate deity' and is absorbed.²²⁵ Moreover in Hindu sacred texts, Rama Krishna and others passed away, while other Avataras either killed, died, or disappeared and their spirits never returned in the same way. In the case of Christ Avatara is different, Jesus came only once in history, died, was resurrected and He is present with His people through the church in Spirit spiritually. This is not a question of book knowledge but purely a religious experience. Just as Peter's confession, Christ will be known and become personal through the revelation of God.²²⁶

Fifth, Chakkarai states that only in Jesus Christ we see what true humanity is like. Jesus is the true Man (*Sat Purusha*). In creation, the original pattern of humans was Jesus Christ Himself after whom all men have been fashioned and created. Hence, Jesus Christ is not mere Man but demonstrates the true essence of humanity with the true nature of humans. He is the true original human (*mulapurusha*) where man can be compared to God that God intended man to be in creation.²²⁷ Chakkarai writes, "God was not satisfied till He produced out of Himself His very image. In the picture of Jesus, the express image of the invisible has come out." Humans were the picture of the Painter and a picture that has a life of its own.²²⁸ However, Chakkarai explains that true humanity is obscured by some taint or sin and its growth is retarded and there is a deformity in human personality. In Jesus that taint is not there John writes that He was full of glory and truth and that true light has shone on the world. That was the testimony of Christ's sinlessness that He was without sin and true human and looking into Him we see our deformity and imperfection. Many realized their sinfulness in His presence and many were forgiven and ultimately He has spoken that He came to save the sinners. Thus, the Avatara of Christ is to save the sinners and lead them to true humanity after His likeness in the image of God.²²⁹

²²⁵ Yewangoe, *Theologia Crucis in Asia*, 61-62.

²²⁶ Chakkarai, *Jesus the Avatar*, 132-134.

²²⁷ Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology*, 167.

²²⁸ Chakkarai, *Jesus the Avatar*, 205-208.

²²⁹ Chakkarai, *Jesus the Avatar*, 73-79.

Finally, Chakkarai affirms that in the Hindu religion many humans or religious men were elevated as Avataras, attributing divine qualities. The facts and processes involved in the recognition of the divinity and humanity of Christ Avatara are fully different from Hindu Avataras. While venerating humans as god according to Hindu sacred text has no offense, in Jewish history and Sacred Scripture it is the reverse: that none of the prophets and leaders such as Moses, Elijah, Nehemiah, and Ezra rose beyond the level of humanity. Worshipping human beings was a great offense leading to death by stoning. In such background, the apostles and disciples of Christ gave a divine place to Jesus. Peter testified through the revelation and later with a personal experience that Jesus is God and Man in human Person. Thus, Jesus Christ was not deified or elevated or became God but He was and is God eternal came into the human world as the Avatara of God and humans recognized Him and worshiped Him as one true God.²³⁰

4.2.2. Mariasusai Dhavamony's View on Christ's Incarnation

Mariasusai Dhavamony is another Indian Christian Theologian who contributed to Indian Christian theology and his writings and dialogues are a great help to understand the Hindu-Christian terms and concepts. Before exploring his understanding of Christ's Incarnation, he is worthy to be introduced to the readers. Dhavamony was born in Kuthalur a small village in Tamil Nadu State in South India in 1925. He was educated at Catholic Sacred Heart College in Shembaganur. He pursued his doctoral studies at the Gregorian University in Rome. He was ordained in Kurseon, India in 1958. He became an expert in comparative studies of Hinduism and Christianity and was involved with the Hindu-Christian dialogue with sympathy and discernment. He was also a professor of Religions and Hinduism.²³¹

Dhavamony publications speak of his significant contributions to Indian Christian theology and the Indian church and Mission. He was a chief editor of the *Studia Missionalia* periodical and chief Director Editor for the *Documenta Missionalia* series since 1968. Some of his prominent publications are, 'Love of God According to Saiva Sidhanta,' 'Phenomenology of Religion,' 'Classical Hinduism,' 'Christian Theology of World Religions,' 'Christian Theology of Inculturation,' Editor for 'Evangelization, Dialogue, and Development,' and

²³⁰ Chakkarai, *Jesus the Avatar*, 134-141.

²³¹ Dhavamony, "The Buddha as Saviour," 125.

published many books and articles. He was also well known in Rome and published several of his writings in Europe.²³²

Mariasusai Dhavamony's Views:

Dhavamony's incarnation theology begins with the doctrine of the Trinity and the divinity of Christ. In Christ we see pure human nature and how we can partake in divine nature through Christ.²³³ Through the incarnation, Christ became the mediator for humans and bridged the gulf between God and man through his life, death, and resurrection and all humans have access to God through Jesus Christ.²³⁴ There are a few important elements this research may glean from Dhavamony's incarnation theology.

First, Dhavamony discusses the general revelation and the special revelation of God. Dhavamony thinks the incarnation, proclamation of the gospel, and the mission of God are for the whole of humanity and this begins with the Trinity revealed in John's Prologue and ends in eschatology. Hence, like God's general revelation God made known and disclosed His plan through nature and religious people down through the age. Christ the *Logos* put something of His light and truth among men in their religions, cultures, thoughts, and in their literature.²³⁵ This is evident in other religions that there are glimpses of light and fragments of truth here and there in varying degrees. It may be true that they might have struggled in their conscience and illumination to grasp the full truth. However, this could be a brief description and preparatory of God's general act for the gentile world. This general revelation can be found in Paul's writings to Romans (Rom. 1: 18-23). Ever since God created the world, his limited thoughts and power were placed in their minds to see what could be known about God. Thus, in other religions, people in their consciousness do have some divine elements mediated through the Spirit of God. However, sin, darkness, imperfection, and human limitation became obstacles and marred their consciousness so that they may not know Him fully and clearly. Nevertheless, they do have a glimpse of truth, and rays of light, and attempt to know Him and end with confusing ideas and false conceptions. Dhavamony thinks that all men are capable of knowing God the controller of the cosmos. They have dedicated alters to

²³² "Dhavamony, Mariasusai," in *Encyclopedia.com*, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/arts/culture-magazines/dhavamony-mariasusai> (accessed on July 9, 2024).

²³³ Mariasusai Dhavamony, *Documenta Missionallia-30: Jesus Christ in the Understanding of World Religions* (Rome: Imprimi Potest, 2004), 57-59.

²³⁴ Dhavamony, *Documenta Missionallia*, 58.

²³⁵ Dhavamony, *Documenta Missionallia*, 177.

unknown gods to avoid the anger of God upon them which Paul speaks to the people of Athens (Acts 17:18-31). Dhavamony asserts that all this ended in a special revelation of God and John's Prologue that the *Logos* through the incarnation manifested as a living Person in Jesus Christ as the life and light of humans. God has come as the Son of God, begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth. Hence, no more glimpses or fragments, no more confusing theories or perceptions but God in human flesh in human history.²³⁶

The second insight of Dhavamony is about the uniqueness of Christ about the religious leaders. Many religious leaders are considered as the Avatars of God. While some seem to be limited to religious sacred texts such as Rama, Krishna, and Vishnu, others are linked to human history, such as Buddha, Confucius, Gandhi, and Ramakrishna. All these leaders remain in the religious books and teachings. For example, Dhavamony discusses Buddha. In Buddhism, the historical Buddha is not important but the emphasis is on man's answer to the suffering of humanity. The essential part of Buddhism is the teaching or doctrine (Dharma) of how to handle suffering and not the Buddha. Moreover, according to Buddhists, there were other Buddhas in the past and future ages do exist. Again, Buddha always said, 'I am not a god, or a celestial being but the enlightened one. This is an example of many other religious leaders. Once they appear then they may not remain the same.'²³⁷ However, Dhavamony states, that Christ is both revelation of God and one historical Person. The historicity of Christ is fundamental to Christianity. God's plan, His redemptive act, incarnation, and the historical events of Christ are cosmic and take place in the fullness of time. Christ is always One and there is no other Christ. Buddha is not a revelation of God or a revelation from God.²³⁸ In human history Buddha was recognized as a superhuman and enlightened one, Christ will always remain God and there is no comparison to Christ.²³⁹

The third insight Dhavamony discusses is about truth. All religions contain various aspects of truth and it is true to their adherents. All religions feel that no religion contains the absolute truth. At the same time, relativism accepts that all human thinking, perception, and judgments have the elements of imperfection which points to less than absolute and final truth. Some, like Gandhi, think of one universal religion for mankind, compiled with all truths like

²³⁶ Dhavamony, *Documenta Missionalia*, 178.

²³⁷ Dhavamony, *Documenta Missionalia*, 81-88.

²³⁸ Dhavamony, "The Buddha as Saviour," 51-53.

²³⁹ Dhavamony, "The Buddha as Saviour," 52.

syncretism. In all these, attention is paid to only the positive aspects of other religions and ignoring the deficiencies in other religions. It is necessary not to condemn other religions at the same time cannot ignore the negative aspects and accept the erroneous ways of other religions. Moreover, what universal truth unites all religions, and what is specific that cannot divide humanity? The answer is the revelation of God in human history which stands positive, and specific and brings salvation and unites humanity. In God's revelation, Christ alone contains moral values and, the savior qualities of other religious traditions, and He alone is God and Man who is the perfect Mediator for all, more than any principle, reality, truth, priest, saint, or king. There is only one truth and God communicates that truth in Christ alone.²⁴⁰

Fourth, according to Dhavamony, in a pantheistic context all saints, divine men, superhuman, and many Avataras are finite beings and illusory manifestations of the supreme god. The transcendence of God requires all other beings to be distinct from Him. Finite creatures depend on God but never merge with the reality of God. This is the basic idea of creation.²⁴¹ This is not the same with Christ. Christ is a unique Person because He is not merely human or creature but He has the divine-human personality. God only knows reality adequately and totally. The uniqueness of Christ is understood in His relationship with the Trinity. The divinity and humanity of Jesus were the deed of the Triune God and not any other superficial way like the Avataras or illusory manifestations. Christ's unique character points to what the Trinity did in Him in the historical revelation and incarnation and what Jesus did is because of what He was and what the Trinity had planned in eternity.

Finally, Dhavamony writes that the Holy Scripture suggests another purpose of the incarnation. The ultimate and supreme purpose of all God's works is for the Glory of God. When Christ was born, angels sang glory to God. Jesus said, I have finished the work and glorified thee on earth (Lk. 2:14; Jn. 17:4). The incarnation of Christ and the work of Christ have the element of missionary apostolate. The *Logos* was made flesh and became man so that mankind become like God in grace and become the sons of God.²⁴² This was a mystery in the inner Trinity which was hidden from the beginning and is revealed through incarnation. All the centuries pointed towards Christ. The *Logos* took human life, birth, redemptive death

²⁴⁰ Dhavamony, *Documenta Missionallia*, 96-98; 205-210.

²⁴¹ M. Dhavamony, "Dialogue with Hinduism," in *Evangelizaion, Dialogue and Development*, ed. Mariasusai Dhavamony (Rome: Universita Gregoriana Editrice, 1972), 265-266.

²⁴² Dhavamony, *Documenta Missionallia*, 181-183.

on the cross, fulfillment of times, and end of all in the incarnation. Christ's work includes the redemptive act of God.²⁴³ God became man to elevate mankind and all will know the work of God, both visible and invisible in Christ. Thus, in this, we grasp the kerygma of God. The kerygma is the preaching of the gospel and proclaiming the salvation act of God that constitutes the doctrine of incarnation. The God-Man, Incarnation and death, recapitulation of the world in Christ and the church, all is the Trinitarian structure of every salvation act of God. From the Father comes the *Logos* and *Logos* through the Spirit brings back the church to the Father.²⁴⁴

Regarding mission of the church Dhavamony suggests two things. First, the proclamation of Christ's incarnation in India must be done authentically in Indian ways. That is to say, use the Indian language, terminologies, art, liturgy, and the philosophical and theological traditions of India.²⁴⁵ Second, Dhavamony suggests making the message of Christ suitable to the Indian context with inculturation and contextualization.²⁴⁶ If not, in Dhavamony's opinion, the message of Christ's incarnation in India will be considered as foreign and Christian endeavor as proselytism. All religions need to know Christ's incarnation with the missiological concern so that they will find the One true God in Christ alone.

Conclusion:

All Indian Christian theologians acknowledge Christ the *Logos* the second Person of the Trinity came in the flesh. Christ's incarnation was and is once and for all, and is unique compared to the Hindu Avatars. However, the ideology of Avatars has similar features to communicate Christ's incarnation to Hindus in India within their context. Thus, with warnings and conditions Chakkarai and Dhavamony suggest using the term Avatars for Christ with missiological concern. Moreover, when Christ is introduced as the Avatars of God, in knowing Christ they may know one truth. This would help Hindus who search for the truth based on general revelation help finding the truth in the special revelation of Jesus Christ and His incarnation. With Chakkarai and Dhavamony's understanding of Christ's uniqueness, in the next chapter, there will be a comparison between the Hindu concept of Avatars and Christ's incarnation.

²⁴³ Mariasusai Dhavamony, *Hindu-Christian Dialogue: Theological Soundings and Perspectives* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002), 79-80.

²⁴⁴ Dhavamony, *Documenta Missionalia*, 181-183.

²⁴⁵ Dhavamony, *Hindu-Christian Dialogue*, 19.

²⁴⁶ Dhavamony, *Documenta Missionalia*, 188-192.

Chapter Five

Comparison and Contrast of the Concept of Avatar and Christ's Incarnation

In this chapter, the research will evaluate the similarities and differences between the concept of Avatara and Christ's incarnation based on previous chapters. The research focuses similarities and differences between the two concepts and theologians' views. In this chapter, I will highlight the major facts under the headings such as sacred texts, theologians' views, and opinions.

The research shows that the terms Avatara and incarnation are similar only with respect to the theological idea that the divine can come down as human. According to the plan of God or mission or particular purpose, both terms remain the same. According to Indian Christian theologians, Christ's incarnation is not the same as that of Avatara of Hindu sacred text. For the Indian context, in order to communicate Christ's incarnation the term Avatara can be used to help the hearer with contextual and missiological information. In this regard, Jesus may be introduced as the Avatara of God yet with clear differences, conditions, and warning that He is not the same as the Avatara concept. Further, this research indicates that since the ideology of the terms is similar, both Avatara and incarnation are used interchangeably to the Hindu concept and Christ's incarnation in Indian Christian theology and other literature. That is why for the understanding of similarities and differences, in this chapter the term Avatara is used for the Hindu concept while incarnation is used for Christ's incarnation.

5.1. The Views of Vedic Creational Texts and the John's Prologue

The present research points out that there are three Vedic creational hymns and John's Prologue. Both of them include that there is a supreme God behind the creation and humanity. The Vedic interpretation presents the Purusha the Prajapati and later the 'Ultimate Principle Brahman' as the Supreme Creator. John's Prologue presents the pre-incarnate Word and the Incarnate Christ in human history as equal to the Creator God but not identical with God. According to both, there is the Creator God behind the whole creation and Avatars and emanations and Christ's incarnation proceed from the Creator God.

However, with respect to the Creator God in the Vedic hymns and John's Prologue, there is a difference. The first hymn speaks of the ancient Purusha; the second hymn has no creator god but has a glimpse of the 'Ultimate Principle' while the third hymn says that Prajapati is the God of gods who is linked to all Avatars in other sacred texts. Further, for the fact that Prajapati functions as a husband of the people and no one knows who this Prajapati is. According to Doniger, there are many interpretations related to the creator that provoked hundreds of complex commentaries among Hindu theologians, which raises unanswerable questions and doubts.²⁴⁷ Dhavamony says it is still a puzzle and confusion with Hindu theologians to identify one supreme God based on Vedic texts and the riddle remains unsolved.²⁴⁸ Chakkarai thinks the unmanifested Purusha or Brahman who cannot relate to human experience is non-existent to humanity and cannot even constitute Avatars.²⁴⁹ Thus, it is a clear indication that there is no proper conclusion for the identity of the Hindu Creator God in Hinduism. While there are multiple Avatars believed to come from the Creator God, no one knows who that Creator is and how those Avatars are related except they are present as many emanations of the Creator God in the Vedic texts.

This is entirely different in John's Prologue. The pre-incarnate Word came in the flesh in the Person of Jesus Christ in human history and people recognized Him as God and Man and worshiped Him. There is no confusion or puzzle in explaining One true God in Christ. Moreover, according to Christian and Reformed theology, "the mystery of godliness" (1 Tim. 3:16) is revealed and explained in Christ. Bavinck states Christ is the incarnate Word, prepared from ages. Jesus is the pre-cosmic Person, ordained of God, prepared to come into the human world, revealed in the Scriptures, displayed his divine attributes (full of glory, grace, and truth) in this world of sin, and maintained his honor as God.²⁵⁰ Berkouwer affirms that Christ is the incarnate Son of God, revealing both human and divine nature and His disciples witnessed to this, and the church continues with the same faith.²⁵¹

Thus, the Vedic sacred texts cannot give a clear picture of the Creator God; nor absorb John's Prologue. In fact, John's Prologue can supersede the Vedic concept of the unknown god and

²⁴⁷ Wendy Doniger, *On Hinduism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 181-185.

²⁴⁸ Mariasusai Dhavamony, *Hindu-Christian Dialogue: Theological Soundings and Perspectives* (Amsterdam: Rodopi Editions, 2002), 42-43.

²⁴⁹ V. Chakkarai, *Jesus the Avatar* (Allahabad: Christian Literature Society for India, 1926), 212-215.

²⁵⁰ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, Vol 3*, ed. John Bolt (Michigan: Baker Academic, 2006), 274.

²⁵¹ G. C. Berkouwer, *The Person of Christ: Studies in the Dogmatics, Vol 6* (Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing, 1954), 60-72.

reveal the true Creator God in Christ.²⁵² According to the theologians view, there is no clear concept or truth about the creator God in Hinduism or in any Avatara while Christ's incarnation clearly points that He is the Son of God and He came to reveal the Creator God to humanity which was explained and revealed in John's Prologue and in Christian dogma.

5.2. General Revelation and Special Revelation

According to the research, there is a certain understanding of the one God in both views. As Dhavamony points out, though often Hinduism is interpreted in different ways, such as Polytheism, Pantheism, Henotheism, and Kathenotesim, still Vedic people strive to identify all Avataras to one supreme god presented in the creational hymns. They insist that there is only one God with many names and Avataras. According to Bavinck, the Christian Scripture reveals that there is only One God exists in three Persons, namely, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Thus, both views to a certain extent believe in One God and not many gods.²⁵³

Further, with regard to one God, Dhavamony discusses in general, that God is one for all humanity and no other or many gods. This one God revealed Himself in the past in different ways to humanity. According to Paul (Acts 17:28), God is present in hymns and poems of other religions as a glimpse of light and fragments of truth which theologians call the general revelation of God.²⁵⁴ Christian Scripture says that there is only one God and other religions are aware of this (Rom 3:29; 1:19-21; James 3:19). In Dhavamony's opinion, while attempting to get to know that One God, Vedic people may have ended up with confusing ideas and false conceptions.²⁵⁵

The difference is, that John's Prologue is the special revelation of God and answer to all those confusing, puzzling concepts and other glimpses and fragments of general revelation of God. In the Prologue, God in a special way and a very specific Person reveal Himself to humanity. It is not with hymns, poets, religious teachings, and all kinds of Avataras, dreams, and visions but in a human Person. People can touch, speak, hear, and see Him face to face and know Him. Bavinck clarifies this in his view that the ideas of God and incarnation occur

²⁵² Raimundo Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism* (New York: Orbis Books, 1981), 21-30.

²⁵³ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, Vol 3*, 274-275.

²⁵⁴ Dhavamony, *Documenta Missionallia*, 177-178.

²⁵⁵ Mariasusai Dhavamony, *Documenta Missionallia-30* (Rome: Imprimi Potest, 2004), 178-179.

in all religions, and it is not limited to the people of Israel but to the whole of humanity.²⁵⁶ Their puzzling concepts, noble glimpses, and beautiful expectations and expressions point and connect to one specific Person that is Jesus Christ.²⁵⁷ Berkouwer asserts that God in Christ can be known by all who seek to know Him through the special revelation of God through the Scripture that Jesus Christ is God in human Person and there is no one beside Him.²⁵⁸ Hence, not only disciples of Jesus Christ but many pietistic Hindu leaders have testified that Jesus Christ is not an ordinary human but God. According to Dhavamony, for many Hindu prominent leaders, Jesus as God-Man proceeds daily across this vast peninsula enlightening and healing the millions. Jesus is a powerful reality in human history. There is no one like Jesus since the birth of creation and only He is the perfect man on earth, he is perfect because He is both human and divine. Many Hindus admire, venerate, and respect Christ and say He is in our hearts and we worship Him as God.²⁵⁹

Thus, God gave general revelation to seek and find Him. However, the process of seeking Him in their own way might have led Vedic people to confusing concepts and they might have developed the concept of an unknown god and Avataras in their hymns like Athens. This could be a part and a result of general revelation as humans thirst to know God, as God's view; "that they might grope for Him and find Him," (Acts 17:26-29). It cannot be denied that there is a certain understanding of creator God in Hinduism through general revelation. Moreover, Vedic people venerate and worship Jesus as one of the gods because they are ignorant of special revelation of God. Hence, once they receive the full revelation of Christ through special revelation in John's Prologue and in the Scripture they will find the one true God whom they are seeking.

5.3. Prajapati and Jesus Christ

The Vedic texts point to Prajapati as the supreme god, begotten son, and the primordial supreme sacrifice, and him alone the devotees' worship as the God of gods. Jesus Christ is the only begotten Son of God who sacrificed His life for the salvation of humanity and is worshiped as God by millions of Christians. In Hindu hymns as well as in interpretations of the hymns it is only Prajapati who is highly esteemed and interpreted as the one supreme god.

²⁵⁶ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, Vol 3*, 212-216.

²⁵⁷ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, Vol 3*, 238-240.

²⁵⁸ Berkouwer, *The Person of Christ, Vol 6*, 344-355.

²⁵⁹ Dhavamony, *Documenta Missionalia*, 57-59.

Similarly, Jesus Christ as the second Person of the Trinity is believed to be God existing eternally.

However, the difference is that while Prajapati is limited to Vedic texts and recognized by the Vedic people as God, later many gods are linked to him as Avatars of Prajapati. In addition, in many Vedic texts, other gods are revered and became more popular than Prajapati. It is not the same with Jesus Christ. According to Reformed theology, in the eternal plan of the Trinity, Jesus Christ is the permanent Mediator between God and humans. Bavinck states that this plan was revealed in the creation of humans in God's image as a preparation for Christ's incarnation in human history in the fullness of time (Eph. 1:10; Gal. 4:4).²⁶⁰ In the self-revelation of God in the Scripture and John's Prologue God is fully revealed in Jesus Christ in human Person. Berkouwer argues that the eternal Christ continues to remain the same Person through the Christian church.²⁶¹

Thus, while there is much confusion and interpretations of Prajapati and all theories are accepted without clarity. Moreover, Prajapati is only in the hymns and not revered or worship in Hinduism. However, there is no other interpretation or theory about the Person Jesus Christ. The church, without any confusion or controversy, continues to believe that Jesus Christ of the Scripture is one and the same all through the ages and eternity (1 Tim. 3:16; Heb 13:8). He is the incarnated God for all and invites all to come to Him and find answers to all human needs in Him (Matt. 11:28; Jn. 6:37; 5:21-29).

5.4. Many Avatars and One Incarnation

According to Vedic texts, many Avatars came into the world to help humanity. They came in several ways and appeared to humans and some of them have been in the human world from their birth until their death. Similarly, Jesus Christ came in human flesh and lived in the world to restore humans from sin and death and to give life and eternal life. According to Parrinder, scholar in Hinduism, there are several features of Avatars according to Hindu sacred texts.²⁶²

1. Avatars are real
2. The human Avatars take worldly birth
3. The lives of Avatars mingle divine and human

²⁶⁰ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, Vol 3*, 277-280.

²⁶¹ Berkouwer, *The Person of Christ, Vol 6*, 60-67

²⁶² Geoffrey Parrinder, *Avatar and Incarnation* (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), 12-126.

4. The Avatars finally die
5. There may be historicity in some Avatars
6. Avatars are repeated
7. The example and character of the Avatars is important
8. The Avatara comes with work to do
9. The Avatars show reality in the world
10. The Avatara is a guarantee of divine revelation
11. Avatars reveal a personal God
12. Avatars reveal a God of grace

Parrinder thinks that all these features imply Jesus Christ except the sixth. However, not just the sixth but there are other differences compared to Christ's incarnation. While Avatars are uncountable, continue to repeat, with different names and different bodies like Krishna, others repeat with the same name and different bodies such as Buddha. Moreover, there is no element of grace to sinners but Avatara appears according to the need and prayers of only his/her devotees at any time, in any form (docetic, theophany) with or without a body.

Berkouwer clearly discusses, based on the Scripture, early church councils, and Reformed theology that Christ's incarnation is unique in human history and will not be repeated. Christ's incarnation is antipodal to all religions and mythology of theophany and popular mystery concept.²⁶³ According to Bavinck, Christ's incarnation is not with a particular task or to fulfill human wishes, but it is the eternal plan of the Triune God that begins in eternity and continues through the ages leading to the salvation of humanity and the messianic kingdom. For this one incarnation, the Scripture prepared the whole world, including Jews as well as Gentiles, and not just any particular religion.²⁶⁴ Further, based on the one incarnation of Christ, Chakkarai explicitly differentiates Christ's Avatara as unique compared to all Hindu multiple Avatars.²⁶⁵

Thus, Christ's incarnation is only once, prepared by the Trinity to all humans that includes Vedic and all other religions. There is no other Avatara or incarnation that gives salvation or reveals God's plan to humanity. It is only Christ incarnation that happened only once in human history that makes a way for salvation and eternity. Moreover, Scripture affirms Christ's act in human history is only once for all (Rom. 6:10, Heb. 9:28; 10:10 1 Peter 3:18, 1

²⁶³ Berkouwer, *The Person of Christ*, Vol 6, 332-337.

²⁶⁴ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, Vol 3, 278-279.

²⁶⁵ Chakkarai, *Jesus the Avatar*, 127-132.

Jn. 2:2 Acts 4: 12). Hence, in all these facts, essence, and nature, Christ remains unique compared to multiple Avatars and their docetic, theophanic appearances.

5.5. The Purpose of Avatara and Christ's Incarnation

In the Vedic text, the purpose of Avatara is to maintain the cosmic order and relationship with humanity. In doing this, Avatara enters into the human world to help the devotees, giving them access to see the divine in person and receive liberation from this sinful world. The incarnation of Christ has a similar concern and offers salvation and eternal life to humanity.

The major difference in respect to the salvation of human beings, Avatara enters into the world to destroy evil, sinful people and restore the moral order. Moreover, Avatara seeks to help the devotees and in return, humans should follow religious obligations and strive to become divine. It is a give-and-take pattern that if a person does not continue in Vedic rituals he is sinful and will be destroyed by the Avatara. Hence, Avatara destroy sinners and allow devotees to be merged with the deity to receive liberation from this world. In this, either way, humans lose their identity at once and forever.

However, according to Bavinck's Reformed view, the purpose of incarnation begins in the eternal counsel of the Trinity. Where sin entered the world by the will of the creature, in the counsel of God, the incarnation of Christ brings redemption from sin. It is God's good pleasure to provide salvation to humans which is the most magnificent proof of God's compassion for humans (Jn. 1:29, Gal. 4:4-5, Heb. 2:14; 1 Jn. 3:8).²⁶⁶ According to Berkouwer, the soteriological aspect and the history of salvation is part of the doctrine of incarnation. Christ's incarnation and His works in human history benefit humanity in terms of helping them to know God and receive salvation through Christ's redemptive work.²⁶⁷ Chakkarai points that humanity is obscured by sin and there is a deformity. Christ came to save the sinners and lead them to receive His likeness in the image of God.²⁶⁸ Dhavamony states, Christ's work includes the redemptive act of God. God became man to elevate

²⁶⁶ Berkouwer, *The Person of Christ, Vol 6*, 278-279.

²⁶⁷ Berkouwer, *Studies in the Dogmatics*, 104-111.

²⁶⁸ Chakkarai, *Jesus the Avatar*, 73-79.

mankind and all will know the work of God through preaching of the gospel and proclaiming the salvation act of God.²⁶⁹

Thus, it is strange to read that Avatara comes to destroy the sinners. God's plan is not to destroy sinners but to save them and lead them to His eternal kingdom. Sinners are offered God's salvation, redemption, re-creation, and eternity through Jesus Christ. All those who come to Christ will not lose their identity nor be destroyed but live with Christ forever. Jesus said, "I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish," (Jn. 10: 27-29; 1 Jn. 5:11-12, 20).

5.6. Prophecy, Prediction and Fulfillment

According to the Hindu sacred text, the Avatara would come whenever there is a decline of moral order and devotees are in danger, to save the world, preserve the righteous, and re-establish humanity with moral order. In the sacred text, there is a prediction of the *Kalki* Avatara at the end of *Kali Yuga* (present age) to dissolve the present age and begin a new righteous age which is not according to human history. The fact is, often the Vedic text attributes these predictions to any deity and divine men and continues to expect Avataras for the fulfillment of such predictions. As a result, the Avataras continue to exist in different ways yet in reality the evil continues to rule on earth. As Dhavamony states many enlightened religious leaders elevated and defied the Avataras of god and considered that they came to fulfill these predictions.²⁷⁰ Chakkarai points out that many Avataras died or disappeared and their spirits never returned in the same way.²⁷¹

Bavinck explains the difference between religions. The ideas of incarnation and a Mediator exist in other religions in the form of priests, kings, Avataras (lower deities), and spirits. Moreover, there is an 'unconscious prophetic tendency' and a general expectation in other religions that one day good will overcome evil and there will be a righteous kingdom. To some extent, these predictions are similar to the prophecies of the Messianic kingdom in the Scripture. The ideas and prophecies are the expectation that God coming into the human world to establish the moral order and relationship with humans under one Mediator. Further,

²⁶⁹ Mariasusai Dhavamony, *Hindu-Christian Dialogue: Theological Soundings and Perspectives* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002), 79-80.

²⁷⁰ Dhavamony, *Documenta Missionalia*, 81-88.

²⁷¹ Chakkarai, *Jesus the Avatar*, 132-134.

Bavinck states, according to the Scripture, Christ is “the desire of all nations” and He is “the Gentile's hope” (Hagg. 2:7; Isa. 42:4; 51:5; 60:9).²⁷²

Adding to Bavinck, Dhavamony thinks, Christ’s incarnation is the fulfillment of all ‘divine scriptures and revelations’ that are part of general revelations in all religions of the world. Hinduism has a glimpse of light and follows it with ambition, thirst, and seeking to find truth until they reach the higher light.²⁷³ Christ is the crown of Hinduism and all the highest aims, aspirations, and motives of Vedic people can find hope, way, fulfillment, and satisfaction in Christ. Hence, all Vedic predictions need to be considered as preparation to meet Christ.²⁷⁴ Chakkarai observes that Jesus Christ as the Avatara came only once in history, died, was resurrected and He is present with His people through the church in Spirit spiritually. This is not just a prediction or book knowledge like Vedic hymns it includes purely a religious experience according to the Scripture. Just as in Peter’s experience, Christ will be known and become personal to all, through the revelation of God.²⁷⁵

Thus, the predictions and fulfillments of Vedic text often seem inexplicable, remains as book knowledge and far from the human history and experience. Further, Vedic texts continue to seek the fulfillment of the predictions. However, Christ’s incarnation gives a clear picture of the fulfillment of all that humanity is expecting from God including Vedic people. Christ’s incarnation is part of God’s plan, preparation, revelation, and fulfillment in human history and Vedic people can find their expectations in Christ. Christ is the fulfillment of all the Laws, prophecies, and all human expectations. Through Jesus Christ all humans can have the relationship with God once and forever and the hope of the future permanent kingdom of God (Lk. 2: 28-32; Matt. 5:17-20; Lk. 24:44; Rev. 11:15).

5.7. Knowability and Unknowability of Avatara and Incarnation

According to the Vedic texts, when the supreme deity descends into the human world to spend the entire lifetime, he comes as an ordinary human being and does not appear in a supernatural way. During his time on earth, only a few will recognize him but many will not

²⁷² Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, Vol 3*, 238-240.

²⁷³ Dhavamony, *Documenta Missionalia*, 177-179.

²⁷⁴ J. N. Farquhar, *The Crown of Hinduism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 433-444.

²⁷⁵ Chakkarai, *Jesus the Avatar*, 132-134.

recognize him.²⁷⁶ A similar thought is expressed in Christ's concealment that is of the Christ's incognito. Christ was not recognized by many men when He was on earth. Even to Christ's disciples, it took some time to understand His divinity and humanity.

However, there is a clear difference. As Berkouwer states Christ's incarnation is directly antipodal to all pagan religions and the idea of Avatara is always the 'immediate knowability of god.' The transcendent deity suddenly appears to men in a marvelous theophany and becomes directly knowable.²⁷⁷ This is different from Christ and His approach. Berkouwer explains Christ entered into the human world with complete earthly reality in the human flesh most distant from the divine glory. Christ did not abdicate his deity but for a certain period he concealed it. In Christ, there is the concealment of his glory and absolute unknowability that Christ can be mistaken for any man. This is the reason many did not recognize Christ's divinity and thought of Him as a prophet or in the words of Dhavamony, in Hinduism, "He is another divine man or a religious teacher."²⁷⁸ Hence, Berkouwer asserts Christ will not be known to anyone immediately but only by faith one can understand Him. To the natural mind and heart Christ is not fully transparent in the deepest meaning. However, the decisive fact is that Jesus is revealed through revelation and Scripture (Matt. 16:17; Jn. 1:1-18; 20:28).²⁷⁹ Chakkarai's opinion remains the same that Christ is known to us through God's self-revelation in the Scripture with the concept of immanence and personal experience.²⁸⁰

Thus, while Vedic texts do speak of the unknowability of Avatara, many other Vedic texts speak of a deity appearing with supernatural glory and performing miracles and signs. The devotees will immediately perceive the Avatara. The difference is evident between Avataras and Christ's incarnation. Avataras appear in several ways and there are multiple Avataras with long and short period durations with different tasks. This is true and clear in the Vedic texts and the purpose and functions of Avataras. There is a significant divide between Avataras and Christ. People will know Christ only when they seek to know Him and find Him through faith according to the Scripture (Lk. 11:9; Jn. 20:28-29; 1 Pet.1:8-9).

²⁷⁶ Swami Vineswarananda, "The Bhagavat-Gita: Its Early Commentaries," in *The culture heritage of India*, ed. C.P. Ramaswami Aiyar, Vol.II (Calcutta: The Ramankrishna Mission institute of culture, 1997), 189.

²⁷⁷ Berkouwer, *The Person of Christ*, Vol 6, 332-337.

²⁷⁸ Dhavamony, *Documenta Missionalia*, 60.

²⁷⁹ Berkouwer, *The Person of Christ*, Vol 6, 344-347.

²⁸⁰ Chakkarai, *Jesus the Avatar*, 212-215.

5.8. The Vessels of Grace and Permanent Incarnation

The concept of Avatara presents many deities and divine men believed to be Avataras of God. According to Dhavamony, some seem to be limited to religious sacred texts such as Rama, Krishna, and Vishnu; others are linked to human history, such as Buddha, Gandhi, Ramakrishna, and others. According to Hinduism, they are divine, enlightened, embodiment and the manifestation of god in human history. Accordingly, Jesus Christ is also considered as one among them by all the recognized Hindu divine men such as Ramakrishna and Vivekananda. Hence, including Jesus Christ all these divine men of history were considered the Avataras of the supreme unknown principle called God.²⁸¹

It is true to a certain extent that many men have impacted humanity with their moral and spiritual lives and through deeds. Nevertheless, all cannot be the Avatara of God or part or essence of the Supreme God because they were born and are part of a sinful world.²⁸²

According to Ramakrishna (who was also considered an Avatara), all divine men were born and bound souls before they received enlightenment and illumination and became divine men.²⁸³ Moreover, Chakkarai claims that they were elevated and defied as Avataras by humans, attributing divine qualities. They cannot be called god but only represent god.²⁸⁴

Bavinck thinks, as finite creatures, humans becoming god or elevating themselves to the rank of God is not God, “for what is evolving is not God.”²⁸⁵

Jesus Christ differs from them in all aspects. As Bavinck discusses, Jesus Christ is the eternal Son of God, the second Person of the Trinity. As Berkouwer argues and discusses Jesus lived a sinless life on earth and the Scripture speaks of Christ’s sinlessness. Only God is sinless and Christ has demonstrated God’s life.²⁸⁶ The first man, Adam was created sinless in the image of God and later fell into sin and lost the glory of God, Jesus Christ was tempted but did not sin and remained sinless (Gen 1:26-31; Rom 5:12-14; 3:23; 2 Cor. 5:21; 1 Pet. 2:22; 1 Jn. 3:5). Chakkarai states that Jesus Christ demonstrated the true essence of humanity, full of glory and truth without sin.²⁸⁷ This is the most distinct divine and human nature that separate Christ from all other humans, enlightened men, and Avataras.

²⁸¹ Dhavamony, *Documenta Missionalia*, 60.

²⁸² Heinrich Barlage, *Christ Saviour of Mankind* (West Germany: Steyler Verlag, 1977), 45.

²⁸³ K.P. Aleaz, *Jesus in Neo-Vedanta* (Delhi: Kant Publications, 1995), 162-166.

²⁸⁴ Chakkarai, *Jesus the Avatar*, 134-141.

²⁸⁵ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, Vol 3*, 285--286.

²⁸⁶ Berkouwer, *The Person of Christ, Vol 6*, 240-242.

²⁸⁷ Chakkarai, *Jesus the Avatar*, 73-79.

Further, according to Dhavamony, all those divine men became part of a kind of syncretistic religion as their teachings have similarities and relate with other religions. In addition, all of them taught a partial truth and considered they too had elements of imperfection and their teaching was less than absolute and final truth. There are negative aspects and many erroneous ways that are found, at the same time they have divided humanity, establishing many religions.²⁸⁸ In addition, deities of Vedic texts remain impersonal, and historical divine men claimed they were not gods but only represented god. This is not the case with Jesus Christ. Jesus alone in human history claimed with a profound statement, “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life,” (Jn. 14:6).²⁸⁹ It is unique that in God’s revelation and manifestation according to the Reformed theology, only Christ stands as the perfect Mediator both divine and human who communicates God’s complete truth to humanity.

Moreover, all those divine men remain in the religious books and teachings. Chakkarai asks, what is the real meaning of these deities and Avatars in human history and religious experience? Rama Krishna Buddha Ramakrishna and others passed away, while some Avatars were killed, died, or disappeared and their spirits never returned in the same way. Jesus Christ does not fit in any of those stories, myths, sacred texts, and traditions.²⁹⁰ Chakkarai continues, that Jesus Christ remains unique and unparalleled to all those deities and divine men. As John’s Prologue presents the incarnate Word became a human person. He remained a human person; He died, was buried, yet resurrected and appeared as the same Person after His death. He promised to His disciples that He will be with them to the end (Lk. 24:36-49; Matt. 28:16-20; Jn. 20: 26-31; Acts 1:3-11, 1 Cor. 15:3-8). Thus, He is present with His people through the church in Spirit spiritually and still active in the human world.²⁹¹

In the same line with Chakkarai, Berkouwer in his lengthy discussion about the church’s confession of Christ the true God and true man concludes that Jesus is the living Lord of all times. John’s Prologue and all books that describe what the exalted Christ is, are of only one piece with the work He performed on earth. Jesus is the Lord of the church, governing and working in the Church and His work is indescribable. He remains through the living faith of

²⁸⁸ Dhavamony, *Documenta Missionallia*, 96-210.

²⁸⁹ Dhavamony, *Documenta Missionallia*, 81-88.

²⁹⁰ Chakkarai, *Jesus the Avatar*, 127-130.

²⁹¹ Chakkarai, *Jesus the Avatar*, 132-134.

the church that is irrevocably intertwined with the Scripture that: “Jesus Christ the same yesterday and today, yea, and forever” (Heb.13:8).²⁹² Finally, Bavinck affirms Christ occupies a very different place than any other religious leader of the world. There are incomplete revelations in other religions, there are many moral good humans who are elevated to the level of god and often called gods, they are all not fully wrong neither to be regarded as instruments of Satan, but as vessels of common grace. They all attempted to show the way of positive moral content that is close to God’s truth. Still, they are all not the true complete revelation of God or fully divine persons. The true complete and final revelation and manifestation of God is found only in Jesus Christ. “He is God, existed in the ‘form’ of God, was the effulgence of God’s glory, the only-begotten Son of God, the image of the invisible God, indeed, God above all, to be praised forever.”²⁹³

Thus, Jesus Christ is the one, and only and there is no second to Him. Jesus Christ is not elevated or defied by men as God but He is God. He was the only sinless human Person, full of glory and truth, remains as the Lord of the church, active in the world through the Spirit. All enlightened men pointed humanity to God while Jesus said, ‘I am the way.’ Hence, the true fellowship between God and humans can be maintained in no other way than by the confession of Christ as the true God in heaven and on earth. All those who are seeking and searching God can find the one true God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Conclusion:

The research indicates that the terms Avatara and incarnation are similar only in their ideology but in essence they are different. The religious texts believe that God is unknown to humanity, no one has seen God. However, through general revelation in many ways God made known that He exists and He is the Creator. Finally, God in Jesus Christ came in the human flesh and revealed Himself to humanity. Jesus Christ is the second Adam, the perfect human in glory and truth and fulfillment of all that was revealed and aspired by humans. On the basis of the discussion of Reformed theologians and Indian Christian theologians, Jesus Christ is the one true Avatara, incarnation of God, both human and divine, and the perfect Mediator between God and man. He is unique compared to all that is claimed as divine and the pinnacle of all that is revealed observed and believed and in Paul’s words, Jesus Christ is the pre-eminent above all things both in heaven and on earth (Colo. 1:12-20).

²⁹² Berkouwer, *The Person of Christ*, Vol 6, 363-365.

²⁹³ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, Vol 3, 284-286.

Chapter Six

Conclusion and Recommendations

The research began with the difficulty of communicating the message of Christ's incarnation to the native people of South India. The Hindu concept of Avatara is rooted in the native people's belief system and is also often used to indicate the incarnation of Christ. However, there is tension among the Indian Christian theologians, some suggesting Christ can be communicated as Avatara of God while others think that Christ's incarnation is unique compared to the Hindu Avatara concept. Hence, the research began with a question, *what can we learn from a conversation between selected Reformed and Indian Christian theologians on the concepts of incarnation and Avatara in order to communicate the unique characteristics of the divine incarnation of Christ in the Indian context?* To answer the question the research focused on the concept of Avatara in the Hindu sacred texts and Christ's incarnation, especially as revealed in the John's Prologue. Further, to find the characteristics of Christ's incarnation, the research focused on two Dutch Reformed theologians, Herman Bavinck and Gerrit Cornelis Berkouwer, and two Indian Christian theologians Vengal Chakkarai and Mariasusai Dhavamony. All four theologians' views, similarities, and differences indicate the unicity of the Person and work of Christ and the understanding, that his unique incarnation cannot be compared to the concept of Avatara.

It is evident in the Hindu sacred texts that the concept of Avatara is a significant aspect that indicates a specific relationship between the supreme deity and humanity. Krishna, one of the main Avataras of Hindu sacred texts relates the Avatara to the supreme god Prajapati in the hymns. Even though there is no consistent explanation or description about Prajapati as the one supreme god, he is related to multiple Avataras. This is not the same with Jesus Christ. John's Prologue says Christ is the pre-incarnate Word, who was with God and is God who came in the human flesh. He is the Son of God the second Person of the Trinity fully revealed in human Person. Christ's disciples witnessed His earthly manifestation as God and human.

In Hinduism, the goal of Avatara is to maintain the cosmic order and relationship between the supreme god with humans. Hence, to please, protect and answer to their prayer, there are countless Avataras, who come to destroy the sinners, protect the righteous, and re-establish the moral order. According to Christian theologians, Christ's incarnation took place only

once in human history according to the eternal plan of the Trinity and is very different from the Hindu countless Avataras. Moreover, the church continues to preach, teach, and proclaim Him as the unique Mediator between God and humans. Also, Indian Christian theologians acknowledge that Christ is the supreme God who came into the human world according to the eternal plan of God.

In Hinduism, many Avataras are result of devotees' prayer, desires and demands without any prior plan or specific purpose. According to the Reformed view, Christ did not come into the human world because of humans' prayers or their intention to see god. It is purely the act of God's love, care, and concern for His creation and humanity that point to Christ's incarnation. In the eternal counsel of God, He made the plan regarding the human world before the creation. The Christian dogmas find their final goal and meaning in Christ and His incarnation which was "the mystery of godliness" (1 Tim. 3:16) before it was revealed in Christ. The first humans were the picture and image of God. Christ, the second Adam, was the perfect image of God, when He incarnated as a human Person to be the one Mediator of all things. This plan of God and its preparation began in eternity and was revealed to God's people after the fall. The election of Israel, prophecies, and miracles all are part of the eternal plan of God and preparation for Christ's incarnation. Ultimately in the fullness of God, the pre-incarnate Word became flesh. John's Prologue reveals fully the plan of God in reality.

According to Hindu sacred text, Avatara come into the world to destroy sinners. This is different to Christ's incarnation. In the plan of God, Christ's incarnation brings salvation and re-creation to humanity in a unique way and His work in the flesh benefits sinners and opens up the grace of God to all sinners to receive salvation and eternal life. Christ's sinlessness, His work of redemption to humanity, and His humility demonstrate on earth being God cannot be compared to any human or deity in the world. He is the unique Saviour and remains as God and human not just in His incarnation on earth but also in eternity.

However, it was not easy for all humans to accept Christ as God in a human Person, because Christ's entire life on earth was mainly that of incognito, God's revelation in concealment. His glory is concealed in the human person. He was in the form of an ordinary human yet displayed His glory and power through His words and deeds. Christ's disciples understood His divinity and confessed that He was the Son of God. Nevertheless, they struggled to reproduce a clear formula to provide proof against all human understanding and errors related

to Christ's incarnation. Christ could be understood only through the revelation of God to all those who seek to know Him. After Christ's Ascension, there were many controversies in the Christian church, debates, and struggles to understand Christ's humanity and divinity in one Person. In the midst of all these, the church stood on ground and believed and continues to confess that Jesus Christ is, 'truly God and truly man' (Latin-*vere Deus, vere homo*). In the plan of God, Christ's incarnation brings salvation and re-creation to humanity in a unique way and His work in the flesh benefits sinners and opens up the grace of God to all to receive eternal life. Christ's sinlessness and humility demonstrate that no human or any deity can be compared to Him. He is a unique Saviour and remains as God and human not just in His incarnation on earth but also in eternity.

Further, the truth of Christ according to John's Prologue and the Reformed theology is acknowledged by Indian Christian theologians who believe that Jesus is unique compared to all Avatars of Hinduism. The Indian Vedic people in their genuine attempt to know God developed unclear ideas about God. As a result, there is an ideology of incarnation and mediator of God among them just like in other religions. Hence, Indian Christian theologians suggest using the existing ideology and concepts in the Indian context to communicate Christ's incarnation. This may help and lead people to understand the uniqueness of Christ and to get to know Him as the one true incarnate God.

Practical Recommendations:

The research would recommend a probable fruitful approach to preach and teach the unicity of Christ's incarnation in the Indian context based on the Vedic texts, discussion, and opinions of the Reformed theologians and Indian Christian theologians.

Open Attitude

First, in the Indian context, when preaching to the people to whom Christ is unknown, the approach could be just like the Apostle Paul: without any condemnation. Seeing the people of Athens he says, "Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious." Paul continues with the inscription which he had noticed, "To the Unknown God," which exists and is familiar to all people. Paul writes, "God made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their pre-appointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us" (Acts 17: 16-30). As

researcher, I am familiar with the Indian context: this is the same situation. Vedic people are very religious and continue to seek and try to get close to God in whatever possible way they think to know God and have a relationship with God. They believe in god and attempt to know god in whatever is revealed to them in their Vedic scripture. However, they are still far away from the one true God. Their prayer remains the same,

Asathoma sath gamaya (From the unreal lead me to the real)

Thamasoma jyothir gamaya (From the darkness lead me to the light)

Mrithyoma amritham gamaya (From the death lead me to the immortality).²⁹⁴

This is why they are continuously seeking to know God. When many wise men who are understood as ‘vessels of common grace’²⁹⁵ tried to lead them to the truth, people called them the divine men and Avatars of God. All this is due to their ignorance. Thus, keeping these things in mind, without condemning their attempt to know God through Vedic hymns and Avatars, Jesus needs to be introduced to them. They need to know John’s Prologue of the full revelation of God to humanity through Jesus Christ who is the answer to their prayers.

Trinitarian Understanding

Second, while there are multiple Avatars in the Vedic text, Hindu believers still think and seek one supreme god who is probably a shadow and divine principle in their hymns.

Reformed theology clearly testifies to the existence of one true God and His divine acts in human history. The eternal God exists in three persons, namely the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. In the divine Being of the Trinity, the Son occupies the Second position. Thus, it is the only begotten Son of the Father and the image of God who assumes incarnation, sent by the Father and conceived by the Holy Spirit to bring salvation and restoration to humanity.

Hence, incarnation is the work of the Trinity prepared from eternity. Jesus Christ incarnated to reveal God and His plan to humanity.²⁹⁶ Hence those who know Jesus Christ according to the revelation of the Scripture will know the revelation of God and find the true God. Without the knowledge of Jesus Christ and the Trinity, people remain ignorant of one true God.

Moreover, Bavinck asserts that all human priesthood and sacrifice points, directly in Israel, indirectly among other peoples (including the Vedic people) to the one perfect person Jesus

²⁹⁴ J.S. Benjamin, *Christ in the Ancient Vedas* (Visakhapatnam: Jyothi Press, 1990), 27.

²⁹⁵ Bruce R. Pass, *The Heart of Dogmatics: Christology and Christocentrism in Herman Bavinck* (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2020), 78.

²⁹⁶ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, Vol 3*, ed. John Bolt (Michiga: Baker Academic, 2006), 274-275.

Christ.²⁹⁷ Thus, Jesus Christ must be introduced to the Vedic people as the pre-incarnate Word and the second Person of the Trinity.

Contextualized Theology

Third, in the Indian context, introducing Christ should be carried out with contextualization because 'context matters.' Reformed theology is contextual and can serve people in a meaningful way.²⁹⁸ Indian Christian theologians acknowledge the fact that Jesus Christ is not the same as Vedic Avatars nor can He be compared to any Avatars. Nevertheless, they suggest that Indian terms, ideology, and concepts can be used effectively to communicate the message of Christ. With a clear distinction and knowledge between Vedic Avatars and Christ's incarnation, the ideology of Avatars can be used to help the Indians understand Christ and know Him within their context. Just like the approach of the Apostle Paul in a new context, Indian Christian theologians are in favor of using the unknown concept of Prajapati of the Vedic hymns to introduce Jesus Christ to the Vedic people. According to Indian Christian theologians' the names 'Jesus' in the Hebrew language and 'Prajapati' in Sanskrit have the same meaning as 'husband of the people.' Furthermore, the Prajapati, the pre-cosmic ancient Purusha, begotten before all the worlds, lord of creatures, the primordial Vedic sacrifice, the God of gods, all these features of Vedic hymns that are pointed out can be absorbed in Christ alone as revealed in John's Prologue and in Reformed theology. Christ is the only counterpart of the Vedic understanding of Prajapati and there is no one else in the Vedic text that fits in but Jesus Christ. Hence, according to Bavinck's and Berkouwer's ideas, Indian Christian theologians' opinion on general revelation, probably the Prajapati concept is a fragment of the diamond sparkling amidst dust till Jesus the true light appears. Christ is the Life and Light and true Savior and Mediator to all humanity and Hindus will be delighted to see that great Light in Christ.²⁹⁹

Points of Connection

Finally, Christ is unique and God wants all humans to know Him through the Son Jesus Christ. Once Christ is known, people will know God and the uniqueness of Christ. Hence, based on general revelation, with the noble thought of leading Hindus to Christ, using the Prajapati concept as a starting point is an advantage to help Hindus to know the truth. The

²⁹⁷ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, Vol 3*, 330-331,

²⁹⁸ Hans Burger, Class lecture, Theology is Contextual: Common Course, November 15, 2023, Theological University, Utrecht.

²⁹⁹ Laji Chacko, *Introduction to Christian Theologies in India*, (Kolkata: SCEPTRE, 2014), 56-59.

ideology of Vedic hymns and the Prajapati concept would allow them to think natively, receive the divine message in their own terms and concepts, and reflect on it, this may lead them to know Christ more deeply and profoundly.

It is unlikely to think that Paul believed that the inscription of the unknown god signifies Jehovah, Jesus Christ, or that writings of poets are on the same level as scripture (Acts 17: 22-31). However, it could be assumed that Paul, with the noble thought of leading those people to Christ or the Holy Spirit, may have allowed Paul to use those revealed truths of their existing beliefs as his starting point to introduce Christ to them. Chakkarai, Dhavamony, and many others follows the example of the apostle Paul who had non-Christian backgrounds, that once they met Christ they did not turn back to their previous traditions, even considering their previous traditions as rubbish/dung/dust (Philp. 3:1-11). Hence, using the ideology of hymns and the Prajapati concept to lead people to Christ is a worthy and honorable thought. As theologians affirm, once Hindus realize the living Christ in life, they would not think of any other impersonal god, an unknown god of hymns but remain with the personal Savior Jesus Christ. Thus, the ultimate goal of using the Vedic concepts would help them to find a way to know the Living Savior within their context.

Bibliography

- Aleaz, K.P. *Jesus in Neo-Vedanta*. Delhi: Kant Publications, 1995.
- Aleaz, K.P. *Theology of Religions Birmingham Papers and other Essays*. Calcutta: Moumitha Publishers and Distributors, 1998.
- Barlage, Heinrich. *Christ Saviour of Mankind*. West Germany: Steyler Verlag, 1977.
- Bassuk, Daniel E. *Incarnation in Hinduism and Christianity*. Hampshire: The MACMILLAN Press Ltd., 1993.
- Batumalai, S. *An Introduction to Asian Theology*. Delhi: ISPCK, 1991.
- Bavinck, Herman. *Reformed Dogmatics, Vol 3*, ed. John Bolt. Michigan: Baker Academic, 2006.
- Beasley, George R. *Word Biblical Commentary, Vol 36*. Texas: Word Books Publishers, 1987.
- Benjamin, J.S. *Christ in the Ancient Vedas*. Visakhapatnam: Jyothi Press, 1990.
- Berkouwer, G. C. *The Person of Christ: Studies in the Dogmatics, Vol 6*. Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing, 1954.
- Bird, Michael F. *Evangelical Theology: A Biblical and Systematic Introduction*. Michigan: Zondervan Publishing, 2013.
- Bloomfield, RT Griffith and AB Keith, M. *Four Vedas: Rik, Yajur, Sama, and Atharva, English Translation*,
<https://ia801205.us.archive.org/11/items/FourVedasEnglishTranslation/Four-Vedas-English-Translation.pdf>
- Boice, James Montgomery. *The Gospel of John: An Expository Commentary Five Volumes in One*. Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1985.
- Boyd, Robin. *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology*. Delhi: ISPCK, 2009.
- Brink, Gijsbert Van den. "G. C. Berkouwer," in *T&T Clark Handbook of Neo-Calvinism*, eds. Nathaniel Gray Sutanto and Cory Brock. London, New York: Bloomsbury 3Pl, 2024.
- Brinkman, Martien E. *The Non-Western Jesus: Jesus as Bodhisattva, Avatara, Guru, Prophet, Ancestor, or Healer?* London: Routledge, 2014.
- Brown, C. "Person of Christ," in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley. Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986.
- Brown, David A. *A Guide to Religions*. Delhi: ISPCK, 2006.

- Bruner, Frederick Dale. *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*. Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Co. 2012.
- Burger, Hans. *Being in Christ: A Biblical and Systematic Investigation in a Reformed Perspective*. Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2009.
- Burger, Hans. Class lecture, Theology is Contextual: Common Course, November 15, 2023, Theological University, Utrecht.
- Burnett, David. *The Spirit of Hinduism*. England: Monarch Publication, 2006.
- Buswell, James Oliver. "Incarnation," in *Pictorial Bible Dictionary*, ed. Merrill C. Tenney. Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1975.
- Byers, Andrew J. *Ecclesiology and Theosis in the Gospel of John*. United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2017.
- Carman, John B. *Majesty and Meekness*. Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994.
- Chacko, Laji. *Introduction to Christian Theologies in India*. Kolkata: SCEPTRE, 2014.
- Chakkarai, V. *Jesus the Avatar*. Allahabad: Christian Literature Society for India, 1926.
- Chandran, J Russell. "Development of Christian Theology in India: A Critical Survey" in *Readings in Indian Christian Theology*, eds. R.S. Sugirtharajah and Cecil Hargreaves. Delhi: ISPCK, 2000.
- Chakkarai, Vengal. "The Historical Jesus and the Christ of Experience," in *Readings in Indian Christian Theology, Vol.1*, eds. R.S. Sugirtharajah & Cecil Hargreaves. Delhi: ISPCK, 2000.
- Collins, Gerald O. "The Incarnation: The Critical Issues," in *The Incarnation*, eds. Stephen T. Davis, Kendall and Collins. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Das, R. C. "People's Stories and their Theologies," in *Reading in Indian Christian Theology, Vol.1*. New Delhi: ISPCK, 2000.
- Dandekar, R.N. "Indian Mythology," in *The Culture Heritage of India, ed. C.P. Ramaswami Aiyar, Vol.II*. Calcutta: The Ramankrishna Mission institute of culture, 1997.
- Debroy, Bibek and Dipavali Debroy. *Great Epics of India: Vedas The Rig Veda*. Delhi: Books For All :An Imprint of Low Price Publications, n. d.
- Dhavamony, Mariasusai. *Documenta Missionalia-30 : Jesus Christ in the Understanding of World Religions*. Rome: Imprimi Potest, 2004.
- Dhavamony, Mariasusai. *Hindu-Christian Dialogue: Theological Soundings and Perspectives*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002.

- Dhavamony, Mariasusai. "The Buddha as Saviour," in *Buddhism and Christianity*, eds. Claude Geffre and Mariasusai Dhavamony. New York: The Seabury Press, 1979.
- Dhavamony, M. "Dialogue with Hinduism," in *Evangelizaion, Dialogue and Development*, ed. Mariasusai Dhavamony. Rome: Universita Gregoriana Editrice, 1972.
- Doniger, Wendy. *On Hinduism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Eglinton, James P. "Some benefits of going organic: Herman Bavinck's theology of the visible Church," in *Theology in Scotland*, XVII.1 (2010): 23-36.
- Eglinton, James. "Herman Bavinck," in *T&T Clark Handbook of Neo-Calvinism*, eds. Nathaniel Gray Sutanto and Cory Brock. London, New York: Bloomsbury 3PL, 2024.
- Farquhar, J. N. *The Crown of Hinduism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Ford, David F. *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary*. Michigan: Baker Academy, 2021.
- Frawley, David. *What is Hinduism?: A Guide for the Global Mind*. New Delhi: Bloomsbury Publishing India, 2018.
- Gnanakan, Ken. *The Pluralistic Predicament*. Bangalore: Theological Book Trust, 1992.
- Holdrege, Barbara A. *Veda and Torah: Transcending the Textuality of Scripture*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996.
- Hughes, Philip Edgcumbe. "G. C. Berkouwer," in *Creative Minds in Contemporary Theology*. Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1966), 64-65.
- Karmarkar, A.P. "Religion and Philosophy of the Epics," in *The Culture Heritage of India*, ed. C.P. Ramaswami Aiyar, Vol.II. Calcutta: The Ramankrishna Mission institute of culture, 1997.
- Klostermaier, Klaus K. *A Survey of Hinduism*. Albany: New York Press, 1994.
- Knott, Kim. *Hinduism: A Very Short Introduction*. United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2016.
- Lesslie, Newbegg. *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society*. London: SPCK, 1989.
- McFarland, Ian A. *The Word Made Flesh: A Theology of the Incarnation*. Louisville: John Knox Press, 2019.
- McGrath, Alister E. *Christian Theology*. Cambridge: Blackwell, 1994.
- Mckinion, Steven A. *Words, Imagery, & the Mystery of Christ: A Reconstruction of Cyril of Alexandria's Christology*. Leiden: BRILL, 2000.

- Moody, Smith, D. *Abingdon New Testament Commentaries: John*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999.
- Morris, Leon. *Reflections on the Gospel of John, Vol 1*. Michigan: Baker Book House, 1986.
- Noss, John B. *Man's Religions*. London: The MacMillan Company, 1980.
- Packer, J.I. "Incarnation," *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, J.D. Douglas ed. Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1998.
- Panikkar, Raimundo. *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*. New York: Orbis Books, 1981.
- Parrinder, Geoffrey. *Avatar and Incarnation*. London: Faber and Faber, 1970.
- Parrinder, Geoffrey. *The Christian Debate: Light from the East*. London: Virrely Gollanez Ltd., 2009.
- Pass, Bruce R. *The Heart of Dogmatics: Christology and Christocentrism in Herman Bavink*. Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2020.
- Prabhu, George Soares. "The Historical-Critical Method," in *Reading in Indian Christian Theology*. Delhi: ISPCK, 2000.
- Ramachandra, Vinath. *The Recovery of Mission*. Delhi: ISPCK, 1999.
- Rose, Wolter. "Messianic expectations in the Old Testament," In *die Skriflig* 35/2 (2001): 275-288.
- Samartha, S. J. "The Cross and the Rainbow: Christ in a Multi-Religious Culture," in *Readings in Indian Christian Theology*, eds. R. S. Sugirtharajah and Cecil Hargreaves. Delhi: ISPCK, 2000.
- Sarma, D. S. "The nature and History of Hinduism," in *The Religion of the Hindus*, ed. Kenneth Margan. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidoss Publishers Private Ltd, 1996.
- Scharf, Peter M. Scharf, "Creation Mythology and Enlightenment in Sanskrit," *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 48 (2020): 751-766.
- Sharma, Arvind. *Classical Hindu Thought*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Sonderegger, Katherine. "Cyril of Alexandria and the Sacrifice of Gethsemane," in *Kenosis*, eds. Paul T. Nimmo and Keith L. Johnson. Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2022.
- Sumithra, Sunand. *Christian Theology from an Indian Perspective*. Bangalore: Theological Book Trust, 2002.
- Tyangisananda, Swami. "Philosophy of the Bhagavata," in *The Culture Heritage of India*, ed. Haridas Bhattacharyya, Vol.III. Calcutta: The Ramakrishna Mission institute of culture, 1997.

Unger, Merrill F. "Incarnation," in *Ungers Bible Dictionary*, ed. Merrill F. Unger. Chicago: Moody Press, 1967.

Vandana, "Water Symbolism in the Gospel of St. John in the Light of Indian Spirituality," in *Reading in Indian Christian Theology*. Delhi: ISPCK, 2000.

Vineswarananda, Swami. "The Bhagavat-Gita: Its Early Commentaries," in *The culture heritage of India*, ed. C.P. Ramaswami Aiyar, *Vol.II*. Calcutta: The Ramakrishna Mission institute of culture, 1997.

Webster's New International Dictionary. Springfield: Merriam Webster Inc., 2002.

Wellum, Stephen J. *God The Son Incarnate: The Doctrine of Christ*. Illinois: Crossway, 2016.

Yewangoe, A. A. *Theologia Crucis in Asia*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1987.

Internet Sources

"Arvind Sharma," in *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arvind_Sharma, (accessed on May 20, 2024).

"Barbara a Holdrege," in Middle East Institute New Delhi, <http://www.mei.org.in/jiis-editorial-board/holdrege>, (accessed on May 21, 2024).

"Bhagavad-Gita," in *New World Encyclopedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bhagavad_Gita, (accessed on May 14, 2024).

Blair Stark, "Brahma Prajapati," (February 6, 2010), <http://mahavidya.ca/2010/02/06/prajapati/>, (accessed on May 24, 2024).

"Brahman," *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brahman>, (accessed on May 20, 2024).

"Dhavamony, Mariasusai," in *Encyclopedia.com*, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/arts/culture-magazines/dhavamony-mariasusai> (accessed on July 9, 2024).

"John 1:14" in *Bible Hub*, <https://biblehub.com/text/john/1-14.htm>, (accessed on June 14, 2024).

"Klaus K. Klostermaier," *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Klaus_Klostermaier, (accessed on May 23, 2024).

"Krishna," in *New World Encyclopedia*, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Krishna>, (accessed on May 15, 2024).

"Mariasusai Dhavamony," in *Encyclopedia.com*, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/arts/culture-magazines/dhavamony-mariasusai>, (accessed on May 16, 2024).

“Nasadiya Sukta,” *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*,
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nasadiya_Sukta#cite_note-3translations-3, (accessed on
May 21, 2024).

“Prajapati,” in *New World Encyclopedia*,
<https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Prajapati>, (accessed on May 09, 2024).

Richard Oldale, “Who is Prajapati in Hindu Mythology,” (October 8, 2016),
<https://www.antaryami.com/hinduism/who-is-prajapati-in-hinduism/>, (accessed on
May 15, 2024).

“Rigveda,” *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rigveda>,
(accessed on May 08, 2024).

Stephen Knapp, “Purusha Sukta,” *A Little Book of Prayers, Mantras & Gayatris*,
https://www.stephen-knapp.com/purusha_sukta.htm, (accessed on May 08, 2024).

“Wendy Doniger,” *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*,
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wendy_Doniger, (accessed on May 14, 2024).

Bibles

The Holy Bible, Hindi: New Testament. Bengaluru: The Bible Society of India, 2021.

The Holy Bible, Kannada: New Testament. Bengaluru: The Bible Society of India, 2010.

The Holy Bible, Telugu: New Testament. Bengaluru: The Bible Society of India, 2016.